

IEVA SIMONAITYTE



BUSÈ AND HER SISTERS

Mikšas Karnelis of Benagai had four handsome daughters—which was the most handsome, it would have been hard to say....

But "handsome is as handsome does," as the saying goes. And the Karnelis house often rang with a loud, peremptory voice. 'Barbė, wash the dishes! Magdė, peel the potatoes! Trudė, go and mind the geese! Pa—can't you see the wheel's coming off the cart again? Ma—go and make the butter!' Or to the maid, "Don't stand here propping up the wall! There's plenty for you to do."

All this came from the eldest daughter Buše. "Her one interest, her one care was the farm which she hoped to inherit. She wanted to make it a farm that people would look at with envy and respect."

The sisters' lives took differing paths. Magdė and Barbė, too, dreamed of wealth, but saw little of it. Magdė married a wheelwright and spent her life making reluctant ends meet; Barbė, idle and sly, often got something for nothing on a petty scale, but wealth eluded her. The youngest sister Trudė and her husband Būblys struck out along a very different path.

But what about Buše?

Buše Pikčiurnienė married too—an unattractive man whom she did not love, but one who had a small farm and never crossed her.

Under Buše the farm prospered. Land was added to it—in-



ЕВА СИМОНАЙТИТЕ

БУШЕ
И ЕЁ СЁСТРЫ

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ

Москва

IEVA SIMONAITYTE

BUSÈ
AND HER **SISTERS**

A NOVEL



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INTRODUCTION

They say the place where the big village of Benagai now stands was once a great stretch of grassland and heath belonging to the Stragainiai knights.

These knights had so much land that they themselves did not know where it ended. That was why there was never a herd to be seen on most of it. The best, most fertile acres near the Stragainiai manor were used for pastures.

This wasteland was covered with coarse grass, heather, junipers, cranberries and bilberries, with occasional pines or birches, perhaps grown from chance seeds, perhaps planted. Mushrooms grew under them in summer-time. Here and there small mounds rose, sheltering peewits that called to rare wayfarers.

This was in summer.

In the autumn, they say, will-o'-the-wisps drifted about until they died out. There were none whom they could lead astray at that time of year.

In the winter-time hares raced over the snow, and wolves came from distant forests to roam the land in great packs.

There were no roads. These were made only when settlers came to the district.

That was when the noble knights lost the right to hang serfs.

As the gallows rotted and collapsed, the serfs felt they had become human beings; they threw off the yoke of great landowners and set out in search of a place to live in freedom.

In due course they came to the neglected Stragainiai lands. Some took a look and went on to seek something better, some place easier to farm, but others chose a place under the pines or birches, and drove in pegs for markers with firm blows of their wooden clogs.

"Here I shall build my house, here I shall live and my children after me," they said, and those words were like a vow, spoken over the neglected land of the knights.

Whether it really did all happen like that, I do not know. But that is how the old folks told it.

The people came to the Stragainiai land with empty hands, with no implements for their toil. Probably that is why the place was called Beinagiai, from "inagis," an implement. Later, the name became Benagiai—a name that slips better off the tongue.

So people began to till the soil. First they made dug-outs, later they put up huts of pine boughs and clay. Still later, when straight, level roads had been laid and the gentry had built sawmills and brickworks round about Priekulė, the settlers with the greatest eye to their own advantage and the best gift for following it began to make themselves quite large houses.

Of these, it must be admitted, there were but few, but nevertheless, in Benagiai there were those who forgot their grandfathers had been serfs and looked around to find slaves of their own. In due course they grew rich on the blood and sweat of men who got but dry crusts for their toil.

Such, they say, was the beginning of Benagiai.

PART ONE

1

In the very middle of Benagiai, by the cross-roads, lived Mikšas Karnelis. Mikšas Karnelis was a peasant. He had over seventy morgen of ploughland, four morgen of forest land, a farm-house, a barn and stable, a team of horses, two cows and a good deal of other property of all kinds. He hired a labourer or a girl whenever he needed them.

Mikšas Karnelis held piously to the belief that the sun moved round the earth, that the world had existed for five thousand years, and that up in the blue sky were God and all His angels, while down below were the devil and all his imps. He knew that stones had ceased to procreate and multiply since the birth of Jesus Christ. He believed with equal fervour that the Germans were the cleverest and bravest people on earth. They had waged several wars in his time, and returned soldiers had told him that they had won them all. And Mikšas Karnelis could quite understand why they were victorious—it was because they were so pious and feared God. For the rest, Mikšas Karnelis was sure that if you were born a gentleman it was only right and proper that you should live and die a gentleman, and if you were born poor it was your duty to serve and submit to your master, even if he were not a real gentleman but only a plain farmer; it was all the same so far as you were concerned.

When Mikšas Karnelis took it into his head to marry, he went to the matchmakers; after all, he could hardly go against old custom and choose a wife for himself, without wise assistance and counsel. The matchmakers would be sure to know best what kind of wife would suit Mikšas Karnelis. A pretty face did not matter, what he wanted was a woman who was capable and a hard worker, one who would make a good farmer's wife. And then—then he would be able to live in peace, to rest from all his hard labour, all the worries of the farm.

When the railway line leading from Germany to Klaipėda was laid, Mikšas Karnelis thoroughly disapproved. The train was too noisy and ran too fast. It looked ready to jump off the rails at any moment! And besides, it frightened the horses. When Mikšas had to go to town—four miles in all—his horses took him there quite fast enough. After all, why hurry? It was seldom he had to go to town, thank God. If somebody was ill, he knew what was needed without any doctors. For a toothache—take a good big glass of vodka. For a stomach-ache—the same thing. In general, vodka was the best cure for all ills of the flesh or the spirit. And it made you sleep well.

Best of all Mikšas Karnelis loved to rest and take his ease. In fact he rested a good deal more than he worked. He who sleeps commits no sins, as the old saying has it. . . . And as for the work—what were labourers for?

Karnelienė* worked more than she rested. But she too found it a burden. She would even begin to doze when she was working. And what kind of order can you have if the housewife dozes?

* Karnelienė—the wife of Karnelis. In Lithuania women take their husbands' surnames with the feminine ending (Karnelis—Karnelienė).

Such, then, was the life of the peasant Mikšas Karnelis of Benagiai.

In due course four daughters were born, four handsome girls, each better than the last.

The first had black hair and black eyes. As soon as she came into the world she opened her mouth to scream, and she kept on with it day and night, never stopping. Karnelienė did not know what to do. She burned incense round the child, and put magic flowers under her pillow, had old Šimkuvienė sprinkle the room over a piece of charcoal and light the fire with flint and steel, and even brought old Keraitis to mutter spells over the baby—but nothing helped.

Then the parents hurried on the christening, afraid that the child might scream herself to death. And Heaven forbid that she should die without a Christian name! But as soon as the christening was over the child stopped screaming, as though for spite.

Well, so Buše*—that was the name given her—no longer screamed day and night, but she soon found other ways of showing her family she was going to be a woman who knew what she wanted and meant to get it. If the mush given her was not sweet enough, she simply spat it out. She would push her quilt on to the floor with one good kick. Her mother, afraid that her feet might get cold, fastened it firmly to the wooden pegs of the cradle; but before she had time to turn round, that baby had either thrust her feet out from under it, or broken the string and kicked the quilt down on the floor again.

Buše found it dull sleeping the whole night through, and wakened early. After making sure that all her fingers and toes were whole and in their proper places, she gave voice in no uncertain manner, rousing not only her mother, but her father too.

* Pronounced Bousheh.—*Tr.*

"Heavens, there's no peace with that child! Got to have everything she wants and have it at once!" grumbled the mother with outward anger but a note of pride as well.

"Slap her bottom," was the paternal advice she often got from her husband, angry at being wakened in the middle of the night.

"Don't be a fool," Karnelienė snapped back. "What can a baby like that understand?"

"Then put her in the small room with Lėnė." (Lėnė was the maid.) "Let Lėnė sing lullabies to her!"

The upshot was that Buše, on the contrary, sang her own "lullabies" to the maids—first to Lėnė, then Ėlžė, then Šiulė and at last Minė—to such effect that they never closed an eye all night.

As Buše entered her teens, followed by her younger sisters, her peremptory voice was heard all day and everywhere.

"Barbė, wash the dishes! Magdė, peel the potatoes! Trudė, go and mind the geese! Pa—can't you see the wheel's coming off the cart again? Take it to the smithy right away! Now, don't go back to sleep—you'd sleep through the Last Trump! Ma—go and make the butter!"

A maid, driven distracted, would bang down a bucket or pan and leave. Another came in her place, until she in turn lost patience with Buše's incessant "Don't stand there propping up the wall! There's plenty for you to do. Go out to the field and level the molehills!"

Later on, when the girls were bigger and the Karnelis family no longer kept a maid but only one farm-hand, Buše would be after him all day, to make sure that he was never idle for a moment.

"Vilius!" (Or "Krizius," or "Jonis"—after Buše took charge, labourers did not stop long.) "Vilius, you'll be the ruin of us yet! You're not hired to loaf about. You're here to earn your keep! D'you think we're going to feed

you for nothing? Take an axe and get off to the forest, it's full of dead wood, and not a log left in the kitchen!"

Sometimes her father or mother ventured to enquire timidly, "Why don't you do something yourself, Buše, instead of only giving orders?"

But she had her answer ready. "People need a stick on their backs, or they won't work, and there'll never be any proper order in the place. I'm not a maid, I'm the mistress. Have you ever seen me sitting about?"

Certainly, nobody ever had. She seemed to be everywhere at once, ordering here, scolding there.

When Buše was still a child running about the village, she often used to hang around the rich farms. Why was it, she wondered, that some people got rich, while others close by lived like beggars? How did it come about? Her keen eyes marked everything, her ears were pricked to catch fragments of talk and her receptive mind absorbed the plain, unadorned creed of accumulation: grab, sweep all you can into your own house, and pity nobody—look after yourself first, second and all the time. This was the rule of life Buše absorbed. Her one interest, her one care was the farm which she hoped to inherit. She wanted to make it a farm that people would look at with envy and respect.

"My farm will be just as good as the Šperberis estate one of these days," she vowed.

Buše made her presence felt everywhere. It was enough for her to come out into the yard, and the hens ran squawking in all directions, leaving only the cock, the bravest, crowing angrily on the fence. The dogs would streak off to the kennels and wait there until Buše had finished storming and gone away again.

"She's so restless, always rushing about, our Buše!" sighed Karnelienė. "Who on earth does she take after? I'm as easy-going a woman as you'd find anywhere, and as for my husband—oh, he's stingy, I'll grant you that,

he'll think ten times before he gives a copper to a beggar. But when it comes to work—he'll never break his back at it, or run his legs off. He lets other people do the work for him. . . . Though if you come down to it, that's what Buše does too. . . ."

Years passed and the four Karnelis daughters grew up. But the younger ones did less shouting and running about, and in general attracted no particular notice. Although, for that matter, who else could possibly be noticed when Buše was around!

As they approached womanhood, however, people found that Barbè was kind and gentle—she often wept with those who were sad and laughed with those who were merry; they saw, too, that Magdè was a good, hard worker, and that Trudè had clever hands and a pretty voice.

Buše, however, insisted that Barbè was a little hypocrite, that she only flattered people and tried to make up to those who were rich so that they would give her presents, and she was greedy as well—that Buše could prove.

"Now you're quite wrong there," her mother objected. She loved all her daughters alike and wanted them all to be admirable in every way. "Barbè always shares what she's got."

"Yes—if it's something she doesn't like!" cried Buše. "You wait and see! . . . And when Magdè works hard, or pretends to, it's just so people'll praise her. Can't you see how she likes to show off? And as for Trudè . . . well, she's young yet, nothing but a colt. You can't tell what she's going to be like. She can embroider and knit and weave, but that doesn't mean she's a good worker. . . . And even if she does make a worker, it may be the sort that'll bring shame on us. Why's she always running off to church? Only to let people hear her squalling. And then she hangs around with all the neighbours' maids. Ugh! Not a single one of them's taken after me.

They're all the sort—" But what sort they were Buše did not define.

Then one day Karnelis, weary of farming and unable to understand any of his daughters, took a headlong decision.

Buše learned from other people that Karnelis intended to sell his farm. Talking to a neighbour, he had said how sorry he was not to have a son; everything would go to Buše as the eldest, and she was crazy, quite crazy! With a mistress like that running the place, he would never be able to sleep peacefully, the one thing he wanted. But Barbè was lazy, a dawdler. Magdè was no farmer, and Trudè—she was still young, he would get tired of waiting for her to grow up.

The talk went, however, that in actual fact Karnelis was badly in debt; he looked too often at the bottom of the glass.

When Buše heard that her father intended to sell the farm, she turned chalk-white. Was it for this she had worked and worried, day and night, never sparing herself? So that others should reap the benefit? How dared her father play a trick like that on her? The ground seemed to be sliding away from under her feet.

"Father—why are you doing it?" she asked agitatedly.

"Because I want to!" her father replied. A glass or two had given him courage.

"And you really intend not to give me the farm?"

"I do."

"But why? Tell me why!"

"You're too bad-tempered and too fond of making other people sweat for you."

The very boldness of his own words sobered him. But he found that the ground had not opened under him, the sun had not darkened; only Buše, who still could not believe her ears, was sitting in front of him, red as a beetroot.

"Who? Me?" she asked, tonelessly.

"Yes—you! It's a pity I haven't a son, if I had—"

"Father!" she said urgently. "Mark my words—if you do wrong by me, you'll be a beggar."

"You'll get your share, the same as your sisters. What wrong is there in that?"

"You'll give me the same as the others? Have the others worked like I have? You say yourself Barbè does nothing but dawdle, she was hardly out of short skirts when she started running around, showing off and making up to folks. And Magdè—now what's the use of her learning to sew? What does a farmer's daughter want with that? As though she couldn't pay a dressmaker! And as for Trudè—she's just a colt. . . ."

About Trudè she could find nothing bad to say. Trudè was still a child, sitting at home singing softly to herself, peeling potatoes obediently and only stealing a moment now and then for her embroidery when nobody noticed her. So Buše could say nothing about Trudè. She paused a moment, then continued: "Very well! Give all the others an equal share, but give me five hundred more. They'll never be farmers, but I shall. I'll show you and them too how to get on."

"No need to storm like that, Buše. By the sale agreement I shall have life maintenance, you can come and visit me whenever you like and for as long as you like."

"It's you who'll be glad to come and see us. If we let you. More than likely you'll not be asked!"

Years passed, it was already high time for Buše Karelíkè* to be getting married, but she was still living with her parents in the house they had sold, but occupied under the agreement for life maintenance. Buše was

* Form of surname for an unmarried daughter. (Klaipeda dialect.)

waiting for a good match. But whether it was because people knew her father had sold the farm, or whether, more likely, because her character was too notorious, the matchmakers came to her but rarely.

Buše waited for a year, waited for two—and still there was nobody. Lines came on her forehead, ominous furrows deepened from nose to chin, and bitter chagrin filled her heart.

Meeting one of the village matchmakers, Buše clenched her teeth and tried to assume a jesting tone as she challenged the woman, "When are you going to get me off, neighbour?"

The matchmaker did not know what to answer. She could hardly say, "Who wants you now?" And indeed it would not be very wise. She would get an answer to make her hair curl. Everybody knew Buše Karnelikė. Let anybody dare say in her presence that she had no farm! What if her father was living on land no longer his own? . . . Just try to argue with her!

2

It was the time of the spring fair, and Buše was walking back home quite alone.

She seethed with misery and rage. Not a man had spoken to her all day—as if to flout her. All of them, acquaintances and strangers, had passed her by as though they could not or would not see her.

But Barbė? Ever since morning she had been running about with that—what was his name? Šnekutis or something. He and his mother had a miserable little farm at the very end of the village, not far from Stragainiai. A beggarly sort of place.

And Magdė—from the tail of her eye she had seen Magdė on the roundabout with some man or other—and a pretty poor specimen he looked, too.

And that colt Trudė—even she had gone to the circus, Buše had not seen with whom. Yes, barely out of nappies, the milk not dry on her lips, and running about with boys. She'd be bringing home more than she set out with one of these days. A pretty kettle of fish!

It was still quite early but Buše made her way home angrily, fully determined to tell her father everything. He ought to give them something to remember. But then, look what he was like himself. . . .

What—*what* was she to do?

Buše often went to church—a little too often; people were beginning to talk. Oh no, Buše wasn't afraid of them, not she, but all the same, it isn't exactly pleasant when the neighbours guess at your secret hopes. And the plain truth was that the church was the best place for making acquaintance. But Buše found nobody. She went to market nearly every week, but there too she failed to find a man whom the daughter of Karnelis of Benagaiai would care to take for a husband. Would she really have to—? Twenty-eight years will never be eighteen again! Her market price was not rising, it was falling. Perhaps in the end she really would have to marry that widower, that windbag Tamošius? But look at all the children he had! Would she be working for herself if she married him? She would not—she would be working for the children of his former wife. Nine of them! . . .

Eh—everything in this world's upside down.

Buše was sunk in gloomy reverie when Pikčiurna overtook her. He too was going home alone.

"You've left the fair early," he remarked simply, without any special significance, pulling his cap down over his eyes.

"Yes, I decided to go. There's nothing interesting there!" Buše answered likewise, without attaching any meaning to the words.

"But the young men?"

"I don't pick up young men at the fair. I'm not that kind. But you—you've left early too."

Buše was afraid he would pass her and go on alone; she tried to match her pace with his. But Pikčiurna had no idea of running away.

"I'm of the same mind," he answered unhurriedly. "You won't get far with a wife picked up at the fair."

"Of course—you're quite right."

Gradually, from one thing to another, they passed to really serious matters.

"I'm a farmer, you know that yourself," said Pikčiurna.

"Yes, I know," answered Buše, thinking within herself: A fine farmer! Can't hire even the cheapest labourer. Aloud, however, she went on: "And you know me too—my father's Karnelis of Benagiai, they call him 'Big Karnelis,' because he's so tall. Of course he stoops a bit now, but they say he used to be very handsome.... There are several Karnelises in Benagiai, that's why they call my father 'Big Karnelis,' to distinguish him from the others. They say one of the Karnelises is a relation of ours, but I don't know anything about that. They're all out-at-elbows. But that one—Dangelas' son, you know him—he wanted to marry me. Just think! What sort of a farm has he got? I'd be ashamed to marry into a place like that. After all, if you want to get on, you've got to have ground under your feet!"

Pikčiurna knew Buše, he knew her father too, and ignoring all side issues he began to sing his own praises unblushingly.

"I'm quite well off. Anything needed about the place I can do myself. I mend my own cart-wheels, I don't have to go to the wheelwright. I whitewashed the cottage a while ago, I painted the shutters blue and the door brown. I don't have to send for any painter or anyone

else when I want things done—they're robbers one and all."

Buše nodded, coughed with dignity, and straightened her kerchief.

"The roof began to leak, the rain came in on the hens," he went on. "Well, thinks I, if I send for the thatcher, it'll cost me a pretty sum. So I took and thatched it myself. It may not look as neat as Kily's would have made it but it didn't cost me anything. And it doesn't leak either."

"Why, there isn't a thing you can't do!" said Buše admiringly, thinking the while: If I were your wife, you wouldn't be crawling over the roof, disgracing me.

"That's as may be," said Pikčiurna, "but, at any rate, when you do a thing yourself, you know how it's done."

"That's a true word! The only thing you need now is a good wife," said Buše, impatience getting the better of her. "After all, if you're a farmer why should you work like a labourer? You don't have to pay a farm-hand much, there are plenty who'll come for a bit of bread these days."

Pikčiurna's face fell; Buše noticed it and hastened to give her talk a different turn.

"But say what you will, I like a man who isn't afraid of work. A farmer who knows how to do things himself can see that others do them properly."

"My horse went lame a while ago," Pikčiurna continued, brightening up. "I took it to Klaipeda and exchanged it for one a gypsy had. It's blind in one eye, but it isn't lame. If I'd tried to sell the other, what would I get for a lame horse? But if I wanted to buy one, I'd have to pay through the nose whatever it was like. I'll look after the new one, feed it up, and I'll have three good horses again."

Buše Karnelikė nodded and nodded to everything he said. But she swore inwardly that she would never drive a gypsy's horse, and one-eyed at that!

"One of my cows went dry. I fed it up, sold it to the butcher and bought one in calf. I'm expecting it to drop the calf any day now. It ought to have come last week. . . . Maybe it'll be today. My old mother's at home, waiting.

"So there it is—I've got everything in the world," sighed Jokūbas Pikčiurna, as though summing up, "only a wife's lacking."

"Now, that's the kind of man I like," said Buše, pretending not to have heard the final words, although they had raised great hopes within her. "I can't abide the kind of man who doesn't know how to cut a stake for a fence, let alone anything else."

"Aye, they're not much good."

Buše's praise flattered Pikčiurna. He slipped a hand into his pocket where a pinch of chewing-tobacco still remained, but then thought better of it and pulled out a handkerchief, blew his nose and polished it well. Perhaps Buše didn't like it when men chewed? How could he tell? After all, if he was going to think seriously of her—

He slid a glance out of the corner of his eye.

She'd make a good housewife, he thought. Not bad-looking, either. All the Karnelises are handsome. Only they say this Buše's got the devil's own temper and likes to order everyone round. But I'd soon bridle her. . . .

"I've got plenty of land," Pikčiurna suddenly remembered he had not mentioned that so far. "But of course you know what Benagiiai land's like. Only fit for pastures. If it were properly cultivated, of course, it would bring in a lot. But how's that to be done? It means hiring labourers, and using fertilizer—the way they do it on the big estates. And all that costs money. You know Benagys—the same kind of land, the same kind of fields, but what a farm he's got!"

"Oh well—you remember the old saying, Jokūbas—

'when wives die, mares multiply.' Benagys is living with his third wife—and d'you know how much money she brought him?"

"That's right, of course," Pikčiurna agreed. "I could marry too, for that matter—there are girls enough all round. But none of them suits me. Those that have money are either lame or squint-eyed, I don't want a wife like that. And without money—"

"Why, Jokūbas!" Buše interrupted. "With a farm like yours you've got to have money. And a girl ought to bring some kind of dowry with her when she marries." Musingly, as though to herself, she continued: "Now my chest's stuffed full, I couldn't get another thing into it, not so much as a needle. Why, I've even ordered a second one. Five men couldn't move it."

"Yes, of course," said Pikčiurna simply, in no way surprised.

"After all, one collects all kinds of things. One has to. When a girl marries she has to think of clothes for maids and farm-hands. You can't make them from nothing."

"You're right there!"

"And I've got a few hundred in the savings-bank, too."

"Oh yes—just a few hundred!" Pikčiurna's tone said he knew well enough it wasn't just a few hundred, but thousands Buše had in the bank.

"After all, I've got to marry sometime," Buše returned to the attack. "And I won't hide it—there's a few good matches I could make. Big farms. There's one I'm considering seriously. But of course the farm's not the only thing—I've got to think of the kind of person I'm going to spend my life with. I want the kind of man who doesn't smoke or drink. . . ."

Buše chose her words carefully. She knew that he did not smoke; as for drinking—well, who could say? But at least he was coming home sober from the fair, so he

could not be a drunkard. She had already taken a few stolen looks at him and decided: not so bad, though he's no beauty. But where'll I find a handsome one? They don't grow on trees for the picking. After all, handsome is as handsome does. He'll listen to me and not cross me, anyway. And I'll get him out of chewing.

About chewing, therefore, she said nothing.

"I've no debts," Pikčiurna started off again as soon as Buše paused. "But I have to admit that you don't make thousands on a farm like mine. And there's one sister still got to have her portion. And my mother to feed. . . . I suppose you know my father's died?"

"Of course! I do live here, after all."

"My mother can have what's her due, and live with my sisters."

"God grant her many years! She's worked all her life and she's a right to her keep. I know your mother—she's a sensible woman, she deserves a good daughter-in-law. . . . I tell you, I like to do what's right and fair. I'd never act badly to those that are on in years."

"My mother's got her faults."

"Who hasn't?" Buše was ready to go through fire and water for old Pikčiurnienė. "Haven't we got faults too? But we ought to give way to old people. After all, we're still young."

"You're right, you're quite right," Pikčiurna hastened to agree.

"On your farm with all that land you could do really well for yourself! But you need a capable wife. After all, your mother won't always be with you. Ugh, how I hate lazy dawdlers! My father always says to me, 'You could make a living off a stone, Buše.' That's what he says. And if your wife has a bit of money, too—"

They were drawing level with a little roadside inn, and now Pikčiurna showed he was a man who knew what's what.

"What d'you say to dropping in at Teizingis' for a bit?" he suggested. "I had some hot sausage at the fair, too salty it was, and now my throat's like a limekiln. A mug of beer wouldn't be bad."

Buše Karnelikė made no difficulties. They entered and sat down at the only table. Pikčiurna ordered beer, then a half-bottle of vodka and a half-pound of good sweets wrapped in paper.

First Pikčiurna drank to Buše's health, then she drank to his, and so it went on until not a drop was left. Buše's cheeks were glowing and so were her spirits.

Pikčiurna became bolder.

"With a woman like you, now, a man'd know what he'd got," he said, looking at Buše's red cheeks and sparkling brown eyes.

"I don't want to boast," she answered looking down modestly, "but there are folks who have a good word for me; they say you won't find others like me on every bush. There's a German, for instance. . . ."

"Others as handsome as you? Or what was it he meant?" asked Jokūbas, interested.

"Well, yes—handsome."

"Did he say that, now?"

Buše laughed and slapped his face lightly when he tried to embrace her too ardently, but she did not move away. As a matter of fact she would have found it difficult, for she was sitting in the corner of the settle. And by the time the inn began to fill up with people returning from the fair, Pikčiurna and Buše Karnelikė had come to an understanding.

It was late when Buše arrived home. Trudė was already there, telling her mother about all she had seen and heard at the fair. There had been everything you could think of—a woman who swallowed eggs right in the shell, and a dog that could count, and clowns—no end of things. Then she began laughing at Buše rush-

ing about all alone, not a man could she catch though she'd dressed herself up to the nines.

"Why doesn't she get married?" said Trudè. "Look how old she is!"

"Aye, she'll be left an old maid yet. Remember, the higher you fly, the lower you fall," the mother admonished her daughter. "What a cross she'll be for us, it's terrible to think of! Even now if you try to say a word to her, she flies into a rage; what'll it be like later? If only she'd take that Tamošius. Of course he's ugly, all whiskers like a goblin and a houseful of children. But at least she'd have her own place. Only I'd be sorry for the children. She'd starve them."

The door banged, and Buše came flying into the room. Mother and daughter started—had she heard them talking about her?

Apparently not.

"Where's Father?" she asked curtly.

"Can't you say 'good-evening'?" said Trudè.

"You shut up, I've no time to bother with you. I've got to speak to Father at once. Where is he?"

"Go and pull him out of the inn," her mother answered and began to lay the table.

"Won't Mother do for you? Why've you got to have Father all of a sudden? You always do what you want without asking either of them. What's got into you today?"

Trudè wanted to tease Buše. She was in high spirits. At the fair, a young man whom she liked right away, at the very first glance, had got into talk with her. He had even brought her home! It was the first man who had ever brought her home or taken her seriously. And he did not ask whether her father would give her a dowry. He did not ask about anything. But in parting he said, "We'll be meeting again." And the way he said it! And the way he looked at her! When would it be? Neither he

nor she had said anything definite about that. But she felt sure she would see him . . . if not before, then at next year's fair. After all, she was still very young. But all that was a secret—she did not even tell her mother. She might tell Magdè. . . .

"I think you're right," Buše answered quite mildly. "I won't talk to Ma or to Pa either, I'll talk to you first of all."

"What?"

Trudè was startled—what on earth could Buše have to say to her? Whatever it was, it boded nothing good. Perhaps Buše was just looking for another quarrel?

Apparently not. Buše's eyes gleamed like those of a cat that has just caught a fat sparrow, her cheeks were red as winter apples, and she wore a triumphant smile. She even looked younger.

"I'm going to get married. What d'you say to that?"

"I say—praise the Lord for answering your prayers at last! You've nearly gone grey waiting for a husband. And until you're married we younger ones have to wait too—from politeness. Well, who's the fine gentleman that's made a bid for you today?"

"Don't you dare to laugh, hussy!"

"What—me? I'm quite serious."

"You'd better be!" Buše threatened, but a smile broke through.

"Well—tell us!"

"Trudè dear, Pikčiurna wants me to bring two thousand. I promised I'd have it in my hand when I marry him."

"Pikčiurna? You're going to marry Pikčiurna?! Goodness, what you've come down to! Did you hear that, Mum?"

"I hear it, I hear it!" cried the mother joyfully. "Whatever he's like, at least it's a husband, though not a very young one. He's taken even longer than you to find him-

self a partner. Well, he's found one at last. But where are you going to get two thousand? You know how much money there was and how it was divided...."

"Buše, Buše!" laughed Trudé.

She could not really say anything against Pikčiurna, but he was so funny, with his crooked nose, his huge hands and short fingers, his clothes that did not fit, and a lumbering walk like a bear—now, how could you help laughing at him?

"What's wrong with him? Why are you braying like an ass? You can be glad if you do no worse. Who were you running about with at the fair today? Think that one was any better?"

Trudé blushed crimson. She was afraid her mother would notice and start asking questions.

"No, no, he's all right, he's fine," she broke in quickly. "All he needs is you and two thousand!"

"Yes, that's just it," said Buše eagerly. "You'll lend me four hundred, won't you? And then when I get rich I'll pay you back."

"Oho, so that's it! Why only four hundred? Why don't you ask for eight?" said Trudé with some acidity. "I see myself giving you my money to pour down the throat of that drunkard of yours!"

"Trudé, he's not a drunkard. And if he does drink I'll soon stop him, so don't start scolding. And there's another thing. You've got a chest and a cupboard too, you don't need all that. You haven't so many clothes, they'd all go in the cupboard. You're young yet, give me the chest."

Trudé was thunderstruck. She knew that if Buše had made up her mind she would get her way in the end, cost what it might. But she hated the thought of giving up her chest—it had been made to her own order, she had dreamed of a chest like that ever since she had been a child. And that cupboard! A bit of rubbish that they had

inherited from an aunt they had only seen once in their lives, and that once at her funeral. None of the girls had wanted the cupboard and it had just stood in the shed, worm-eaten, peeling, with all the hinges off so that the door simply stood up against the opening.

"Why's that cupboard mine all of a sudden, and not yours? Take it yourself!" cried Trudè. "I'll not give up my chest to anybody! All of you got good chests from Father, while I had to buy mine myself, you know that very well! And now you want to grab it, you wolf! Just try it!"

"You shut up! A kid like you, don't know how to wipe your nose yet, and talking back."

"Buše! What's got into you? Are you crazy?" the mother broke in.

"Buše! Buše!" her daughter mocked. "All you think of is coddling that brat! Don't you dare stop me getting married or it'll be the worse for you!"

"I won't give up my chest! I won't! I won't!" Trudè wept loudly.

"Huh, I'm not going to argue with you two. Wait till Father comes—he's the one I'll talk to. He'll agree to whatever I want. He can do as he likes with her things and her money too!"

"You all do as you like, and all you do is rob those that can't help themselves!" wept Trudè. "You've no shame! If you tried it with Barbè she'd scratch your eyes out. Mother—if you don't protect me from that wolf I'll go away and never come back again!"

"Oh dear, oh dear, what can I do, my baby? You see for yourself. And you, Buše, if I had the strength I'd drown you like a rat! You'll bring nothing but grief to people as long as you live."

"Hard words break no bones," replied Buše, unmoved. "You should have drowned me earlier on if you wanted to stop me making a success of my life."

"Success! Who do you take after, monster that you are?"

"Myself!" Buše declared. "Why are you both yelling as though you were being killed? All that fuss—about lending something to a sister. I'll give it back, I shan't eat it."

The father came home tipsy and promised Buše all she wanted.

"Of course! Why not? Plenty of water'll flow before it's time for Trudė to get married," he said.

He was glad to be getting rid of Buše at last.

3

"Just the right name for her!"* the neighbours snickered when Buše Karnelikė married Jokūbas Pikčiurna and moved into his cottage at the other end of the village.

Buše took no notice. They could snicker all they liked. She had a husband and a farm—not much of a one, but her own. There had been no choice. If she had waited any longer she might have been left on the shelf altogether. It wasn't a Šperberis estate, of course, but she knew how to make the most of it—and make the most of it she would.

"They'll soon get tired of yapping," young Pikčienienė decided.

She took charge of the farm like a whirlwind.

On the third day after the wedding she announced that they had celebrated long enough. Lazing about never made anybody rich.

"Life's short, the years run and the days fly like the wind, and look at your farm—how shabby everything is!"

* *Pikčiurna* in Lithuanian means a cross-grained, malicious person.

Pikčiurna frowned at the word "shabby," but he had to agree with his industrious wife—the place certainly wasn't up to much.

Pikčiurnienė needed help to get through all that had to be done. Her husband's sister worked a few weeks for her brother and his wife, and then struck. She announced that her back ached and lay down. But she complained to her mother that Buše would drive any girl to the grave.

"She gives me nothing to eat, she expects me to come to you for my food."

Her mother nodded.

"Yes, I can see what she's like, this daughter-in-law of mine. Better go and live somewhere else, and get out of her way."

The girl did so. Buše cared little, she only remarked that if her sister-in-law came along wanting her portion, then she, Buše, would know how to act. She thought everything over and had a fine idea. Trudė! Why shouldn't Trudė come and work for her?

"You won't be working for nothing, little Trudė!" she urged her sister. "I'll give you something, an apron or a kerchief. You won't be like a hired girl, you'll eat at the same table with us. And you can drive to church with me too, you won't have to walk there. You can even sit in the same pew. I won't treat you harshly like a servant, you'll have a good home. Only of course you mustn't go about telling people you're my sister. Because after all I'm the mistress of a farm, you can see for yourself it wouldn't look well."

Trudė Karnelikė was not a ready talker and could not always find the right words to express herself. So she said nothing, only looked at her sister, sniffed contemptuously as much as to say, "A fine offer!" and tapped her forehead—which could be understood either as

"You're a fool," or "I'd be a fool if I made myself your servant. You've got enough out of me already."

All she said, however, was: "A lot of good it would do me, working for you!"

Pikčiurnienė, of course, lost her temper. Finally, she hired a servant.

One girl, however, was not enough, and soon she got a man too. After all, the farm had to go ahead, not remain stuck-in-the-mud, like so many. Pikčiurnienė was already thinking about buying land with her dowry—perhaps one of the neighbours would be ruined and have to sell out. But for the present what they had must be properly cultivated.

At the very end of Pikčiurna's fields there was some land grown over with heather, green in spring, purple in summer and black in autumn. That heather was a thorn in Pikčiurnienė's side. All the neighbours' children came there to pick wild berries. "Those ragamuffins are over everything like sparrows, and there's nothing left for me!" There were plenty of cranberries and bilberries among that heather. At first Pikčiurnienė would go running to drive off the children. But what was the use? They simply scattered in all directions and as soon as her back was turned, there they were again—like so many sparrows. So finally she found a time when there was nothing urgent to be done, and sent the labourer and the serving-girl to dig up all the heather.

For some reason best known to herself she put the cows in the shed where the horses had stood. The hen roosts too had to be moved; they had been over the pigsties, now they were taken to the sheep pen.

"They're safer there," she said. "If a sleepy hen falls among those pigs—they're like wolves, they'll eat a pedigree hen as soon as look at it!"

The wood shed had to be moved outside the gate because she found the yard too small for the kind of farm

she intended to have. She ordered a well dug in the kitchen garden, and the garden itself made bigger. That meant moving the fence. And at the end of the kitchen garden she had to have a wicket gate.

As far back as anybody could remember the Pikčiurnas had quarrelled with their neighbours about boundary lines. Every year they thought the neighbours had filched a bit. But the old Pikčiurnas had been peaceable folk, they stormed and quarrelled, then quieted down.

"Eh well," they said, "it won't make them rich or us poor."

And so it went on.

But Buše demanded a surveyor.

Old Pikčiurnienė gasped, and Pikčiurna was so startled that the quid of tobacco fell out of his mouth for the first time in his life. A surveyor? But that meant going to the authorities, to the Germans! A self-respecting Lithuanian never did a thing like that.

"D'you think they're just waiting to come as soon as you say the word?"

"They'd better come! It's for them to serve us, not the other way round. I'd like to see them try not to come!"

The surveyors came all right, they measured the fields, and found that the neighbour on the right had got one and a half rikstės* of the Pikčiurna fields.

"What did I tell you?" Buše Pikčiurnienė cried triumphantly.

But Pikčiurna had to give up two rikstės to the neighbour on the other side—Pluta.

"Why the devil did you have to start that?" For the first time Pikčiurna was really angry with his wife. "Why can't you keep your nose out of what doesn't concern you?"

Buše could see for herself that it had not turned out

* *Rikstė*—something over three yards.

quite as she wanted. She was not offended with her husband, especially as she had far-reaching plans of her own.

"Who can tell?" she said. "Maybe it won't be long before we have those two rikstès and all the Plutas' other land as well."

In her heart of hearts, however, she realized that she had made a foolish mistake, and resolved to be cleverer in future.

The path from the farm-house to the highway ran crookedly along the neighbours' irrigation ditches, across the vegetable plot and round the pond. Pikčiurnienė made a straight road in its place, although that meant cutting a corner off the clover field, filling in one ditch and building a bridge over another. With her own hands she planted lime-trees along either side of the new road to make it look like an avenue leading to a man-or-house.

The high-road which ran along the Pikčiurnas' fields had a sandy surface which made walking difficult, and a little pathway had been trodden beside it. Nobody could say how long that pathway had existed, but there it was and there it would probably remain.

Pikčiurnienė, however, had her own ideas about that. The high-road was there for driving and walking, not for the grass to grow on it. She gave orders for the pathway to be ploughed up. But that did not help. A new path was soon trampled, wider than the old one. Then Pikčiurnienė put boundary marks at either end. When people saw the poles wound round with straw they first stopped in surprise, then simply pulled them out. Pikčiurnienė put a fence across the path and hung up a board with the word: *Verboten!* She thought the German would make it more impressive. But that did not help either. What people! For all the world like geese—got used to one thing, and you couldn't make them change.

But Pikčiurnienė was firmly determined to see the matter through.

One fine Sunday after dinner she took her prayer-book to pass the time and drove the geese out herself to the end of the field where the grass was rich and juicy. She took a bucket of water for the geese, settled down under the bushes not far from the high-road and waited for passers-by.

They soon came.

She had little time to read, for the day being Sunday, plenty of people were out for a stroll. Buše shouted at them, pointing to the road. With some she appealed to their conscience, with others to their honesty; and if none of that helped, she threatened to sue them. She shouted and shouted at the top pitch of her voice; even when nobody was there she still kept on shouting, storming and threatening from sheer inertia. The next day she was too hoarse to do more than whisper.

Once order was established outside, so far as it lay within her power, Buše turned her attention to the inside of the house. But here she came up against her mother-in-law.

"This is how I found it all when I came and this is how I shall leave it. Don't you dare touch anything as long as I'm alive," said the old woman sternly.

"What's the meaning of that? Who's the mistress here—you or I?" asked Buše.

"When I married Pukčiurna and his parents lived here, I was the mistress just like you. But I didn't start making changes, I left everything just the way they wanted it. And we all lived together peacefully until they died."

"D'you want to make me live as they lived a hundred years ago? Oh no, my dear mother-in-law, times have changed. We're not going to live in the past!"

"I've said my say. I won't have it and that's enough. Not another word!"

Buše lost her temper.

"I'm not asking you whether you want it or whether you don't. Things are going to be as I want. And I want this place to be a proper house, not like some shed! It's not your money I shall build with, the money's mine. Don't stick your nose in where nobody wants you!"

"I won't have a wall right across the house!"

"Won't you? We'll see about that! I know what you want, you just want to spy on us, to see when we go to bed, what we eat and who comes to see us, and then go and tattle all over the village!"

"I'm not going to be pushed away behind the stove! I won't have it!"

"Nobody's trying to push you behind the stove! Sit there in your corner, but sit quiet."

"A nice thing! Here comes a strange wench and starts doing as she wants just as though everything were hers. That's enough, no more of it!"

All the rest Buše could have stood, but those words "strange wench"! The old hag must be in her dotage!

Buše made no reply but set to work. She put up a partition across the cottage, turning one large room into two smaller ones—one for herself, the other for her mother-in-law. At first she had intended making them both more or less equal in size—after all, the old woman could not live for ever, and the other room would come in handy. But since she had chosen to interfere and make a fuss, Buše gave her a narrow little cubby-hole. She cut a door in the partition wall and always kept it locked. But there she struck a snag, for her mother-in-law nailed up the door altogether on her own side. That was her revenge.

Buše had a separate stove built in the kitchen, so that the old woman would not be in her way all the time. She put her out of the pantry altogether, and told her what door she was allowed to use. Old Pikčiurnienė ought to

be grateful for that—the agreement had said nothing about a door. But for Buše's kindness she would have had to crawl into her kennel through the window.

According to the agreement the old woman had the right to keep two hens, but she kept three. So long as they were on good terms her daughter-in-law had said nothing, although it went against her grain. Nor had she raised any objections to the cat. But when the old woman called her a strange wench, Buše quoted the agreement plainly and accurately as though reading it out.

"You cannot raise two pigs. You cannot keep a third hen. Nor are you allowed to keep that dratted tom-cat that probably kills our chicks. The agreement doesn't give you the right to bring in anyone to live here. So your daughter can come to see you, but she must not stop the night. The agreement says you can go to market twice a month, and you've been going nearly every market-day without asking whether there was room in the cart, or whether we wanted to go ourselves. *Ordnung muss sein*," she added in German, to sound more impressive.

The old woman was ready to go to court. But what was the good? It's no use kicking against the pricks. She cried, then she dried her tears, drowned the cat, killed one of the pigs, and married her daughter off to some Putros who had no farm of any kind. She could not find a prosperous farmer because according to the agreement the time had not yet come for the girl to have her portion. And Buše held that agreement over her mother-in-law's head like a club.

Having surrendered all along the line, the old woman decided to die—at least, that was what she threatened.

But Buše, seeing that her mother-in-law really was submissive, made a noble gesture—she permitted her to keep a third hen. After all, the old woman might come

in useful—for instance, when the time came for Buše to give birth. And that time would come. There would be no need for a midwife. Old Pikčiurnienė was known all over the district for her skill in those things.

4

Every day when Pikčiurna had a free moment he would examine his fence, gate and roof most carefully.

His grandfather's favourite maxim had been: "Always keep your fence and roof in order!"

After the grandfather died, his father would say, "Ruin starts with the fence. Look at—" and he would mention some neighbour. "He's breaking up his fence for firewood. Mark my words, he won't last long."

Sure enough, sooner or later that man would lose his farm.

On the other side of one of Pikčiurna's stout fences lived Jonis Malonė. Pikčiurna considered Malonė to be no solid farmer, even something like a pauper, although Malonė's farm was actually not much smaller than his own.

Jonis Malonė had no fences or gate at all, and there was no sign that there had ever been any. The various buildings seemed to have been dropped at random. And in the middle of his farmyard—if one could dignify it by the name—lay a pond covered with duckweed in autumn, and cracked ice in winter, full of frogs in spring and a breeding ground for mosquitoes in summer. Close to the cottage was the cellar. But what a cellar!—nothing but a hole in the ground, barely covered over. That was how Malonė had inherited it from his father, and it was evidently how he intended to leave it.

Pikčiurna, and Pikčiurnienė still more, lived in hopes that Malonė would go under any moment. That would be a fine ripe plum for them. Look at him—call that a

farmer? No fence, no gate, horses that were just skinny nags, cows that were all bones, pigs that were all bristles.

Everything they had and did was a muddle. In the summer Pikčiurnienė was constantly having to drive out their live-stock; their hens were for ever getting into Pikčiurna's kitchen garden, their cows and horses into the clover and oats.... Perhaps things were not really as bad as the Pikčiurnas thought, but they themselves had no doubts. If a farm had no fence and the roof leaked, then the ropes to tie up the stock would naturally be rotten too. Of course Malonė ought to go down. That was certain, if anything was!

But Malonė kept on. People even said that he had money put away. Pikčiurnienė could not and would not believe it. Would they live like that if there was any money? Without a single labourer, without even the cheapest hired girl, doing every mortal thing themselves? Of course not!

On top of everything else there were sometimes quarrels. The kind that neighbours have.

Malonė had a dog. Not any decent kind of a dog, just an ordinary cur, black as the devil's imps. His name was Sabalius.

One day when Malonė was at the market and Malonienė was kneading dough, the postman came and happened to let the dog loose. Sabalius at once completely forgot his duty of barking at the postman and set off in search of adventure. After sniffing about here and there, he began to investigate the neighbour's recently mended fence. Now in that excellent fence there was one loose board, so loose that it could be moved from side to side. And of course it was just this board the dog found. Sabalius thrust an inquisitive nose through into the yard. Seeing nothing alarming, he pushed the board

aside and followed his nose—which led him into the hen-house.

There his arrival caused an enormous sensation. The Pikčiurnas were too stingy to keep a dog, so the hens had seen such beasts only at a distance. Even the bold red cock stood thunderstruck. The first to recover from the shock was a spotted hen; she realized that here was cause for a panic, and proclaimed one. A brown hen which had just laid an egg flew down squawking from the nest, catching the edge and tipping it over. The three or four eggs in it fell down and smashed. At the sight of this mishap the cock crowed angrily, and that was the signal for a general confusion of clucking and squawking and fluttering.

Pikčiurnienė, who was having dinner, thought a hawk had got into the hen-house and came rushing out with her mouth full; when she saw the cause of the tumult she nearly choked. There was no weapon within reach so she ran for a spade, but by the time she came back Sabalius was gone. He was romping about the field where Pikčiurna's sheep were grazing. And the cock was pecking at the broken eggs.

Pikčiurnienė's hair stood on end at the sight of the destruction.

"Tie up that cur of yours, you good-for-nothings!" she screamed at the neighbours over the fence.

"What's that old crow cawing about?" said Malonienė angrily.

"I'll give you old crow! Can't you even talk decently?" Pikčiurnienė raved.

"What d'you want?" Malonienė asked. Her arms were in the dough and she was covered with flour, so she could not leave her door.

"Tie up that dog of yours, don't let him out into other folks' yards. Look what he's done! Smashed the eggs, frightened the hens and sent them all over the place!"

"I've no time to run after dogs."

"Did I say you're to run after him, you fool? Everything you've got's falling to pieces, even the dog's tied with a rotten rope!"

"Keep your fences mended," was Malonienė's calm advice. "You're always fussing over them, and they can't even keep a dog out."

"Got to watch you the way one 'ud watch thieves, however good our fences are. Took and let the dog loose, and over here it came. And as if that weren't enough, it's out in the field now worrying the sheep. Nobody could live with neighbours like you—no matter how hard they tried, they couldn't!"

"Oh, get out! Everyone knows you, Buše. Spoiling for a fight, are you? I haven't heard your sweet voice for a few days past. Has your husband given you a hiding?"

"What's it got to do with you, you toad, how my husband and I live? I'll give you—"

But it is impossible to reproduce the duet that followed. Malonienė forgot the flour all over her and ran out to the fence. So did Pikčiurnienė. And there they stood screaming shrilly at one another.

It was a grand quarrel.

The hens had long ago forgotten their alarming black visitor. Only the brown hen still mourned over the overturned nest and the broken eggs. She had been hoping for a family of chicks.

Sabalius had had a grand time in the fields, frightened some children coming home from school, dug up a few mole-hills, driven the sheep to the Pikčiurnas' gate and come back home again. And now he was sitting on the grass wagging his tail as though applauding his mistress, and licking his chops.

But there were some things quite beyond words.

One time when Pikčiurnienė had quarrelled with her husband—things like that do happen—she ran to take

refuge with the neighbours. And to whom?—To the Malonés. They had already gone to bed. Buše knocked at the door, then tapped on the window; but nobody let her in or even answered, although she could hear whispering and something that sounded like laughter.

Yes, taking it all round, those Malonés were a thorn in her side. And they even had the impudence to put on airs with the Pikčiurnas. Try to talk to them and they'd hardly answer you, and if they did, it was in the tone they would use to a dog.

Buše swore she would never forgive them for that.

5

Time went on as time does. Buše Pikčiurnienė was so busy putting everything in order that she forgot her sisters. Or if she did not quite forget them, at least she had no time to think about them. And now suddenly she heard they had started getting married, one after the other.

Barbė married Jonis Šnekutis of Benagiai. He had a farm of his own and not a bad one—over twenty morgen of land. But that did not stop Pikčiurnienė from going about calling him a pauper. Look at his sheds and barn—no room to swing a cat. And as for live-stock—a couple of scrawny cows, a horse dying on its feet and a few pigs. Pikčiurnienė would blush to visit a place like that. And people would talk about “your sister Barbė—” she would die of shame!

Barbė insisted, however, that her Jonis was good-looking and a kind husband. Good-looking? Now where were those good looks, Buše would like to know. In his yellow moustache twisted the German way? Or his tie? Just wait—Pikčiurna would be wearing smarter things than a tie one of these days. . . .

The fact was, Buše could not forget that Šnekutis had

once called her an old maid. It had been at the fair. And she had been younger then than Barbè was now.

It was time she paid him out for that "old maid." What would he think of her today?

And Magdè? Magdè did even worse for herself—went off and married Merčius Šilbakis. A wheelwright. Of all things—for Magdè to marry a wheelwright! She used her dowry to buy a little land from Bertè of Benagai, for in a village of that size a wheelwright would never find enough work to supply his wants and save up for a big farm of his own.

"A farm indeed—they don't intend to save at all. They think they're all right as they are. But what about me? My sister a wheelwright's wife!"

Buše knew Šilbakis too, she had met him at a farm where he was making wheels. She had fancied he was casting sheep's eyes at her, what's more. At her! The impudence of it! When she put him in his place, he started jeering at her and played all kinds of tricks—put a hedgehog in her bed, and pushed a stone down her sleeve where it sat so tight that she had to unstitch the sleeve to get it out. A devil, pure and simple!

"But he's managed to slink into our family all the same. Just to annoy me, to get his revenge. And Magdè, the fool, let him talk her round!"

Then, as though marriage were infectious, that snottose Trudè, only twenty-one, caught herself a husband as well. And just think who it was—Būblys, an ordinary labourer!

"Dear Lord in Heaven! All of them marrying paupers! Every one!" groaned Pikčiurnienė. "What on earth shall I do? I'm ashamed to look people in the face!"

There was something queer about Trudè and her husband, too—they did not act like other people. They had only a civil wedding, and when Buše asked what day they intended to go to church, Trudè blushed, gave her

a funny look and said nothing. Perhaps it was true what people said? And what they said was that he was a democrat, that he did not believe in either God or the Devil, that he abused the Kaiser and the priests and talked about some kind of equality and freedom. . . . He ought to find himself a good master, then he'd soon forget about all this equality!

What on earth had Trudė done with her money? Her father had given her enough, even though the amount was less than what Buše and Barbė got. Everybody knew what the others had done with theirs, but about Trudė nothing was known. Perhaps Būblys had had debts? Of course, Pikčiurnienė herself had taken half of Trudė's share. But where was the rest?

It was a disgrace to have relations like that! Nothing to be proud of, nothing to admire about them, no pleasure out of having them to your house, or going to see them either. What could they treat you to if you came, what had they to put on the table? And in case of trouble? No, better have nothing to do with such paupers!

Buše Pikčiurnienė did not break with them altogether, however, although she herself could hardly have said why. Perhaps it was just to keep an eye on them, so that—so that—after all, you never knew what the future would bring. Time would show!

One Sunday morning Pikčiurnienė went to visit the Šnekutises. She found her sister still in bed, and Šnekutis preparing breakfast. Barbė was looking very pretty, rosy as an apple, pleased as a kitten.

"See what a husband I've got! Does your Pikčiurna get up to make breakfast for you?" she asked with a spice of sly malice.

Pikčiurnienė swelled with anger and insulted pride. "I've got a maid to make breakfast for me."

"Why, do you keep her tied down on Sundays too like a slave?"

"She wants to eat on Sundays, too, doesn't she?" Buše snapped.

"Oh yes, I forgot—you keep count of every crumb! . . . A-a-ah! How nice it is to lie comfy in a warm bed one morning a week!" And Barbė yawned and stretched luxuriously.

"He who throws away crumbs will never fill barns," Pikčiurnienė admonished her sister. "Aren't you ashamed to lie there dawdling like that? Even though I've got maids to get my breakfast" (she had only one, but "maids" sounded grander) "all the same I never lie abed till this time of day. You'll never get rich that way!"

But Barbė was not at all ashamed. Six days a week she was up first, why couldn't Jonis get up once?

"And he does so love doing things in the house!"

Šnekutis soon showed that he not only liked domestic work, but was very handy with it.

"Come to breakfast, *Schwägerka*,"* he invited Pikčiurnienė, ignoring the sisterly exchange of scratches. He put the choicest pieces on her plate and kept pressing this and that on her. "Take more! It's all bought with my earnings, the work of my hands!" he said proudly.

"Now, now! You've no room to boast to me!" She said no more, but paid full and deserved attention to the food and real coffee.

When Pikčiurnienė went to visit Magdė Šilbakienė, she found the two of them chasing each other round the well. On an ordinary working day. At first she thought they were quarrelling, but it turned out that they were just fooling about, playing like kids.

"Have you both gone crazy? How far'll you ever get

* A corruption of the German *Schwäger*—brother-in-law, with a feminine ending.

that way? Can't you hear the pigs squealing? Got no more than a couple of porkers to rear and can't feed even those properly. You'll be begging your bread yet, mark my words!"

Actually, the pigs were not squealing and everything on the farm was in perfect order. But Magdė nevertheless blushed for shame and went quickly to the kitchen to prepare feed, and Šilbakis took himself off to a small room he had taken for his own, where he began tootling on a large trumpet.

"Well! What next, I wonder? What's the idea of that? It's clear Šilbakis has no work, or he wouldn't have time for that sort of nonsense!"

Šilbakis made no reply and Magdė busied herself in the kitchen. She was in her own house, Buše could hardly start pulling her hair out as she had at home. So Magdė simply said that her husband played the trumpet in church. He knew how to play, and people had asked him to play there, so in the end he had agreed. If not every Sunday, at least for the big festivals.

"They're all like that, those trumpeters!" snapped Buše contemptuously. "They scoff at God but they go and play the trumpet in church! Think they can buy folks' respect that way. They ought to be ashamed of themselves!"

"Oh, goodness, Buše, there's no pleasing you. If my Merčius goes to the inn you start scolding, if he finds some other amusement it doesn't suit you either! So far as I can see the only thing that 'ud keep you quiet is for us both to go and hang ourselves!"

This called for an answer. But Buše had no time, and still worse, she did not quite know what to say. One word, however, she caught hold of, and made a whole song about it.

"Amusement? Amusement! So going to church is just amusement?! You wait a bit! I'll have a word to say to

the priest about that! And that Merčius of yours'll go flying out with his trumpet like—"

Like what, she did not wait to say; she simply shot out of the gate herself.

Pikčiurnienė's words came true quite soon—Šilbakis did in very fact go flying out of the church; only he was not put out, he went of his own accord.

It happened this way.

The next Sunday, or a little later, there was a church festival of some kind with all the trumpeters present. Everything was going splendidly, at least so it seemed. But after one of the hymns the organist, who could never let anyone forget he was a real German, turned towards the congregation, twisting his moustache, and said loudly enough to be heard not only by Barbė who heard everything, but by Pikčiurnienė too: "*Die Litauer singen wie die Ochsen!*" (The Lithuanians sing like bulls bellowing!)

The next moment something fell with a ringing clatter—an amazing thing to happen in church. People turned round, and saw Šilbakis running out without his trumpet.

Barbė burst into indignant tears. And Pikčiurnienė was thoughtful. She did not know whether to be ashamed because she was a Lithuanian and "sang like a bull bellowing," or to be angry with Šilbakis for boldly throwing down his trumpet and slamming the church door after him.

As though he were at an inn! The foul fiend must be in him, she thought, outraged. Well, I'll tell him a thing or two. But that *Herr* Organist needs a few words as well. Did we really sing as badly as all that? No, I'd better speak to the priest first. He's a German too. Or maybe it would be better to speak to them both?

When you come to think of it, to have the opportunity and the occasion to speak to the priest or the organist

was no small honour if one liked that kind of thing. . . . Buše Pikčiurnienė had long envied the elders; they had the right to enter the church through the vestry.

Why didn't Pikčiurna get on the church council, she asked herself. Simply because he was too stupid. And he couldn't talk German properly. Nevertheless, she meant to act, she would show those gentlemen that even if her husband wasn't very learned, she herself knew what was fitting. She wasn't giving way to any German!

Pikčiurnienė went to see the Būblyses a number of times, but there she could never find any signs of foolishness. Although it was true that they did not go to church. Būblys was always busy, if not in his workshop then about the house and yard, while Trudė would be either spinning or weaving or mending clothes.

Pikčiurnienė, however, had no faith in all this virtue, and so her visits to them were fairly frequent.

One fine Sunday she arrived without warning after dinner, and caught them.

They were sitting together under the birch-tree by the window, Trudė leaning against Būblys' shoulder, her hand in his. He was reading something in German and translating it into Lithuanian.

"You understand?" he asked.

Trudė nodded, then said on a plaintive note, "Shall we live to see it?"

"If all the workers act together, we shall."

It was at that moment that Pikčiurnienė appeared round the corner. Of course, it was Sunday, so they were not working. And they were reading—that was really good! Perhaps they would learn wisdom. After all, there were many pious books—by Jonas Orantas, and August Hermann Franck, and Luther, and Papirás. . . .

"God guide your hearts. Now this is good to see! How glad I am. You do well to strengthen your souls with the Word of God!" cried Buše affectionately, or at least

as affectionately as she could. "What is your book? I don't remember ever seeing one like that."

"We want to learn more than there is in prayer-books," Trudė ventured to say.

Heavens above, thought Buše, what's this?

"Are you a democrat, too, now? Listening to all the rubbish those socialists talk? Is that what my sister's come down to?" Pikčiurnienė was ready to weep. "Was there ever such a disgrace! What shall I do, where shall I hide my face! Paupers—well, all right. . . . But *this*! In our own village!"

Then she recovered her wits and announced that the barking of dogs would never reach heaven and she, Buše, had nothing to fear, thank God; it would be a long time yet before any democrats or socialists ruled the world. And if ever they did, it wouldn't be some Būblys!

After pouring all this out she hurried home. She even felt easier in her mind. In the first place she knew now how the Būblyses spent their leisure, and in the second, she had told them some home truths. And in the third place—everything was now clear!

6

In course of time old Karnelis died. As for the mother, she had slipped unobtrusively out of the world some time before. Folks said that the people who had bought Karnelis' farm and had to maintain them for life in their old home had not treated them particularly well. As soon as Barbė married Šnekutis, her father decided that he wanted to live with her.

There were, however, differing opinions about how much this was really his own wish. Pikčiurnienė went about saying that her sister had lured him with honeyed words. Be that as it might, Karnelis went to live with the Šnekutises. And they welcomed him with open arms.

That was a fact. But the point of the whole matter was that when he moved in he took everything he owned with him—several cart-loads. All sorts of rubbish, Šnektienė called it, but Pikčiurnienė knew there was quite a lot of good stuff, too. And besides, all that was due for maintenance under the agreement went to the Šnektis as well—quite a plateful.

In consideration of all this, Barbė ought to have been ready to do anything for her father, to satisfy his slightest wish—so Buše thought. And as we have said, Barbė certainly welcomed him with open arms. But as for satisfying his slightest wish—! The old man even went to Buše to complain that Barbė treated him badly and said he would prefer to come and live with her, Buše. When Barbė had already taken possession of all his belongings!

Buše reminded her father that she had warned him against Barbė. And now he could see that she was right.

The father found little comfort in that, and announced that he was going to die.

And die he did. He took leave of the world and his property and his daughters.

While neighbour Padagienė watched over the dying man, Barbė, who said the sight was more than she could bear, hurried off to her father's chest in the closet to gloat over its contents.

"Just look at all this," she said to herself. "Father's got heaps of things that are quite good. This sheepskin's new, and there's two pairs of homespun trousers (Pikčiurna could have made use of those, heel heel heel). Now, what shall I do with them? Sell them. They're worth money! Jonis doesn't like country things, he's lived with Germans, he likes town clothes. What a lot of things Father had.... Oh!" Barbė's eyes glowed. "Six shirts, all new! Why, Father hoarded everything like a squirrel! And here's a dress for holidays.... He might have lived another year. Anyway, we must all

die sometime and leave all earthly things! And here's money! Wrapped it up in an old piece of rag and pushed it right down to the bottom so that we shouldn't find it. Of all the crafty old men! Pikčiurnienė doesn't know anything about that money, I'll be bound. And all in gold!"

Barbė quickly untied the rag, counted the money and slipped it into her pocket. She not only resolved to say nothing about it—she forbade herself even to think of it.

Now which shirt shall I bury Father in? It'll have to be a new one, I suppose. It seems a shame! What if we bury him in this homespun, would it be such a sin? It'll rot just the same, whatever it is. What difference does it make? After all, when will Jonis ever be able to get shirts like these? It's not so easy to manage when you're poor. . . . God must have remembered our need. Now my Jonis will have something to wear. And that linen will do for me. Pikčiurnienė will be furious. But why should I give her anything? Yes, but what shall I put on Father when he's dead?

For a long time Šnekutienė wrestled with her good heart.

"Aha, I know what to do!" she cried at last. "I'll use the shirt Jonis bought in Dortmund. It's not new, of course, but it's good enough for a dead man. He won't be working in it, no fear of its getting torn. And it's soft material, white and starched like the gentry wear. Better than that homespun, it won't chafe him," Šnekutienė added for greater justification.

While Barbė's good heart was fighting a losing battle with her hard head, old Karnelis died. Padagienė closed his eyes and ran to fetch his daughter.

"What, already?" she cried. "I'm coming, I'm coming right away! And bringing a shirt to put on him."

With the neighbour's assistance Barbė put the Dortmund shirt on the dead man, then laid him out in the

closet on the chest which contained his property, and covered him with white linen. She put a few spruce twigs on top as well to make it look better, so that Pikčiurnienė would not be able to find any fault when she came.

Some days later, Barbė had sold the rough linen shirts and the homespun trousers and bought herself a black silk kerchief and apron for the funeral. She had not forgotten Jonis either, she had bought him a black tie—what more did a man need?

Everything seemed in order. But for some reason Šneikutienė did not feel comfortable. Perhaps it was because the corpse was still in the house . . . or perhaps she really was sorry her father had died. . . . If somebody knocked or the cat jumped down from the stove, if the gate creaked or the dog's chain jingled, it made her start nervously. She drank salt water but it did not help.

Oh—here was Pikčiurnienė! Pushed her nose through the gate and then followed it. Barbė paled as though the dead man had risen to confront her.

"God be with this house!" said Pikčiurnienė.

"Thank you!" whispered Šneikutienė.

"What are you doing these days?" Pikčiurnienė enquired.

"The same as usual." Šneikutienė answered.

"Well, and so Father's dead," sighed Pikčiurnienė.

"Yes," sighed Šneikutienė.

"Followed Mother to a better world."

"Yes. . . ."

"When are you going to bury him?"

"We thought—on Monday."

"Oh, my dear Barbė, that's far too long! You can't keep a corpse as long as that in summer-time."

"There's no other way. You know yourself you can't have a funeral on a Saturday."

"But you could on Sunday!"

"Yes. Only I don't know if the coffin'll be ready. A lot

of people have died—Kuprienė, and old Vanagas, and Pleikienė's baby. Skeraitis can't keep pace with them all."

"Oh, rubbish! Šilbakis can make the coffin. He'll do it tomorrow."

"But people will have to be told...."

"Give me a pencil and paper, I'll write a note and send it through the village."

Šneikutienė went obediently to fetch pencil and paper. First, however, with a beating heart she asked her sister if she wouldn't come inside and have a cup of coffee.

No, Pikčiurnienė wouldn't.

Šneikutienė hunted in all holes and corners, but no pencil or paper could she find.

Where on earth had Jonis hidden them? Šneikutienė was irritated with her husband and her sister too. That Buše—she could never let anything alone. Here was the coffin ordered, and the grave-diggers already engaged for Monday.... Now where in the world could the things have got to?

There was no pencil in the table drawer, or in Jonis' trousers pocket.... She found the ink behind the clock, but there was no pen. At last it turned up on the shelf. As for paper, Barbė simply tore a sheet from an old exercise-book and ran out into the yard.

Where was Pikčiurnienė?

Buše had gone to the closet where the corpse was laid out and was examining everything carefully—where the body lay and how.

She wept—after all, her father was dead—but her eyes missed nothing.

She saw, for instance, that the dead man had not been shaved, and his hands were empty—no Bible had been placed in them.

"Like some heathen! But what's this?"

Pikčiurnienė fingered the shirt. Could she be mis-

taken? Impossible! But no, it was true—the shirt was an old one. Pikčiurnienė continued her investigation.

Šnekutienė appeared in the doorway with pen and paper.

At that moment Pikčiurnienė uncovered the body completely.

“Oh my heavens, what are you doing?” cried Šnekutienė.

Her sister took no notice. It was dark in the closet, but Šnekutienė had forgetfully opened the door wide, and Buše saw that she had made no mistake—the sleeve of the shirt was even torn. A bony elbow could be seen through the rent.

“Barbė!”

Šnekutienė’s heart turned over. “Oh Heaven,” she sighed, but heaven did not help her.

“Whose shirt have you put on Father?”

Barbė made no reply. She rubbed the back of her neck, straightened her kerchief, reddened—and kept silent.

“You thieving bitch! What have you done with Father’s shirt? Open your mouth!”

“What shirt? His shirts were all—”

“I made one myself for his funeral last year—wove it, bleached it and sewed it with my own hands! What have you done with that shirt? Out with it! Not a word to say, have you? Taken it yourself, I suppose? What have you done with his other shirts? Where’s the sheepskin? Where are his cloth trousers? Where are all his clothes?”

“You’re crazy! Is a sheepskin to go with him in the coffin?”

“Show me all the things he left, bring them out!”

“Buše, Buše dear, remember he was an old man,” Barbė protested. “He hadn’t anything left! You know yourself he liked his glass. He—”

She might have spared her breath. Pikčiurnienė rushed at her with a box on the ear that made Barbė see stars.

"I'll show you, you shameless hussy! Slandering Father in his coffin! Robbing your sisters! Take that! And that!" And Pikčiurnienė, beside herself, struck out furiously, landing blows wherever she could.

The shock and the pain restored Barbė's wits; since peaceful overtures were clearly useless, she began to give as good as she got

"If you want a fight you can have it!" she screamed. "Who looked after Father when he was ill? Whose arms did he die in? Who gave him a home? All you're after is what he left, you snake!"

Kerchiefs were torn off, plaits came undone, hair fell down, apron strings burst, and one of Pikčiurnienė's sleeves was ripped clean out of the arm-hole. Clogs slipped off and rolled noisily over the floor, Šnekutienė's nose was bleeding, when—thank Heaven—in came neighbour Padagienė. She gasped and flung up her hands.

"Oh—dear God in Heaven! Have you gone crazy? Fighting beside a dead man? If you don't fear God, then at least think of what people will say!"

Pikčiurnienė silently tidied her clothes and hair, re-fastened her kerchief, then seized Padagienė's sleeve, pulled her over to the dead man and pointed to the elbow showing through the rent.

"Who did that?" she asked in a voice that made the woman's blood run cold.

Padagienė stammered something about not having noticed, about some kind of mistake.

Pikčiurnienė would listen to nothing, she turned and left. And Šnekutienė went crying to the well to bathe her bleeding nose.

When old Karnelis was being buried, Pikčiurnienė took her sisters Magdė and Trudė by the hand, led them to the coffin, pulled back the sheet and displayed their father's bare elbow.

"God will punish her for that!" Her deep, prophetic tones seemed to issue from underground. "Do you know we're not going to get a thing from her?"

7

Šnekutienė was Pikčiurnienė's sister indeed—not only in blood but in spirit. The only difference was that whereas Pikčiurnienė gathered her property together in a pile, Šnekutienė squandered it right and left.

Šnekutienė wanted to live untrammelled, lie late abed, eat good things and dress richly. When she went to market she always tried to buy as many things of all kinds as she could. She did not feel that she was acting wrongly towards her husband—after all, hadn't she cause to reproach him too? What about the times when he came home reeling?

But Pikčiurnienė could not sleep late and take her ease. Too much to do on the farm. Labourers? Try to find any worth having! Good workers didn't come to the Pikčiurnas, they wanted too much pay. And those that did come—bone lazy, one and all, stuck dummies! You had to be after every one of them with a stick all day long!

Pikčiurnienė often went to church, perhaps she went more than Šnekutienė. But when the collection plate went round, she did not always put something in; she did, however, watch sharply to see what others gave. And she saw all kinds of things. Some only pretended to put something in the plate. Buše was righteously indignant. "Scoundrels! Liars! Trying to deceive God!"

When Buše Pikčiurnienė went to market, she left home at four in the morning and was back by seven. Those labourers—if you didn't keep an eye on them they'd lie snoring till dinner-time or start thieving! Try being away a day, and see how many eggs you'll find, she thought grimly. And how can you tell who's stolen them?

Or the cream. You can put a mark on the jar—it makes no difference, when you come back you'll find the cream's gone down. Now, how can you afford to waste time at the market?

Šnekutienė can let things slide if she likes—and get deeper in debt every day. Money doesn't grow on trees! Why should I worry about dressing well? I'm the mistress here, whatever I wear. Thus Buše Pikčiurnienė reasoned. The time will come when Šnekutienė will have nothing, and I shall have everything....

So Pikčiurnienė put her money in the savings-bank, and added the interest to the capital. And the capital accumulated. But unfortunately the bank paid very low interest. Evidently the sensible thing was to find where more interest could be got, to skim it off and put that into the savings-bank too.

That's how money is made, she thought.

Some liked to save money, others liked to spend it. But there were quite a few, too, who wanted money for business. Pikčiurnienė had no need to seek such people out, they themselves came to her.

The neighbouring manor, Traiškiai, belonged to an old nobleman, von Bergeshoch. He owned the whole Stragainiai estate, consisting of a number of big farms of which Traiškiai was one. The von Bergeshoch family often stayed there for considerable periods.

Pikčiurnienė frequently had to pass the manor because it stood right beside the highway. She looked at it with gnawing envy. The two-storey brick house with its superstructure seemed very rich and elegant. Then there were the two brick barns and a huge hayloft—now that was a real manor! Why, even the ricks were roofed! True, there was neither fence nor gate, but who would want to hide a fine place like that? What would it look like if you put a fence round a manor? Just like some ordinary peasant's cottages! Of course, ordinary peasants don't

have such fine houses, that's true, but still some day, maybe. . . .

And then there were the Bergeshoch young ladies—three daughters, as pretty as could be.

Yes, however one looked at it, there was plenty for Pikčiurnienė to envy about the von Bergeshochs. If she had had daughters she would have wanted them to look just like that.

A far cry from those Malonės living on the other side of the fence, a thorn in the side of decent folks!

Then something happened that Pikčiurnienė could never have imagined in her wildest dreams. But in these times miracles sometimes happen even when you're wide awake.

Pikčiurna came home drunk one day. Rolling drunk.

But that was not important, the really startling thing was that *Herr* von Bergeshoch brought Pikčiurna home in his very own carriage. Yes, *Herr* von Bergeshoch himself! With his own noble hands he pulled Pikčiurna out of the carriage and with the coachman's assistance almost carried him into the house and laid him on the bed.

"What's happened?" asked Pikčiurnienė, thunder-struck—although it was perfectly obvious what had happened. But she simply could not believe her eyes. *Herr* von Bergeshoch! . . .

"It's all right, *gnädige Frau*. Excuse me, please. It will soon pass off. He was drinking cognac," said the noble gentleman, then went out again, climbed into his carriage and drove off.

Pikčiurnienė stood rooted to the spot, staring at the cloud of dust which followed von Bergeshoch's carriage. She had quite forgiven her husband—after all, he had been drinking cognac with *Herr* von Bergeshoch himself!

Of course, von Bergeshoch didn't say *guten Tag* or *auf Wiedersehen*, she thought; he just started off as though

he were talking to a labourer. But still, he did say *gnädige Frau*. And it isn't so long since he called Lithuanians swine and ragamuffins. Evidently he's seen that the Pikčiurnas are different from the others.

Pikčiurna's breath really did smell of cognac. He kept tossing in bed, babbling, "No, no, I won't write it. . . . I can't. . . . I don't know. . . . They'll kill me!"

Some days after that Buše again had to pass the Bergeshoch house on some urgent business. The young ladies noticed her from the distance, and before she reached the gate—that is to say, the place where the gate would have stood had there been one—the *gnädige Frau* herself came out, greeted Pikčiurnienė and very politely invited her into the house. (Describing all this later, Pikčiurnienė said grandly that she was invited into the "palace.")

There the *gnädige Frau* led her into the "salong" (that was what Buše called it—the salong!) and offered her coffee and cake, while the youngest *Fräulein* von Bergeshoch, the prettiest of them all, waited on her mother and the guest, Buše.

After that the *gnädige Frau* herself took Buše over the whole "palace," and showed her everything. And what things there were! Furniture made of some strange wood that grew only in India or the Caucasus. And silver! And china!—Japanese or Chinese or something, it was. "I didn't dare touch it, for fear it might break."

Then she was taken over all the outbuildings. A number of labourers whom she knew were working there. Buše lifted her chin and strutted—let them see how high she had risen! But the curs only snickered.

The *gnädige Frau* herself accompanied Pikčiurnienė to the door (she had quite forgotten her errand). As she took leave, her hostess mentioned casually that *Herr* von Bergeshoch was buying some land near the Stragainiai estate and found himself short of a few thousand.

"He would pay seven or eight per cent interest if he could borrow it from a neighbour on a note of hand.... And the security? Our whole estate!"

The word "estate" swung Pikčiurnienė up to the seventh heaven. Brilliant possibilities flashed before her.... Who knows? Who knows? All sorts of things happen! God helps those that help themselves!...

Pikčiurna was at first beset with doubts, but Buše shouted at him angrily.

"Dolt! If we get the first mortgage— You understand what that means?"

Pikčiurna needed no further argument.

"Think I'm such a fool as not to understand that?"

So Pikčiurnienė went to the von Bergeshochs' again, this time without waiting for an invitation.

8

Then all of a sudden Pikčiurnienė was ill. Actually, the beginning was not so sudden, she simply had a baby—her third. But for some reason she did not seem to recover. Maybe the old woman had had a hand in it, or something of that kind—who could say? It even seemed as though Pikčiurnienė was dying.

Her sisters Magdė and Trudė took turns looking after her, and on the day when not only the doctor but the priest too came to visit her, Pikčiurnienė asked with sudden agitation, "Why doesn't Barbė come?"

Only Trudė was in the room, and at first she thought she had heard wrong. She went up to the bed.

"What was that you said, sister?" she asked.

"I asked why Barbė doesn't come?"

"Barbė?!" Trudė, amazed, ran out to tell Magdė.

"You know—I think Buše's dying."

"Oh, rubbish!" cried Magdė, more surprised than alarmed. "What makes you think so?"

"She wants to make her peace, she's asking for Barbè. Just think! I don't know what to do, should we go for her?"

"The wish of the dying must be fulfilled," said Magdè shaking her head, and went to fetch her sister.

When Barbè heard that Buše was dying and wanted to make peace, she was delighted; she dropped all she was doing and hurried over, putting on a clean apron and kerchief as she ran. Her anger had long evaporated. Now, when Buše was dying, perhaps—but she was afraid to let her thoughts travel any further.

"Is she still alive?" asked Barbè, running in.

Pikčiurnienė turned her face to the wall and said nothing.

"May the Lord God take you into his Heavenly Kingdom, sister," said Barbè, with tears in her eyes.

"I'll get into the Kingdom of Heaven without your help, if I want to," snapped Pikčiurnienė at last, unable to keep silent any longer, and without turning, asked, "Why didn't you come before? Waiting for a special invitation?"

"How could I, when you didn't want to see me?"

"Who told you I didn't?" Buše turned and the look she gave her sister was sharp as a knife.

"Nobody. . . . But I thought—" Barbè looked down.

"I thought we were sisters. When one's in trouble the others ought to help. But how did you treat me? Never showed your face. I may die. And you've never even thought you ought to make peace—"

"Yes, yes, sister, I did think."

"—and not cherish old grudges!"

"That's all true. But you yourself—"

"Don't rake up old grudges, I tell you!"

"No, no, sister. Let's make peace. For a long time I've prayed to God to make you see things the right way. For a long time past."

Pikčiurnienė sat bolt upright in bed.

"Make *me* see things the right way? So you still don't want to admit you're wrong?"

"What's past is past, sister. Don't let's rake up old things, you said yourself...." Barbė began to hedge. "I'd really forgotten."

"You've forgotten what you did to us? You robbed Father in his coffin—and your conscience is easy? I want nothing but truth and justice!"

A very unpleasant moment for Barbė, this. She kept sniffing and wiping eyes that were perfectly dry, blowing her nose—and trying to think of something to say.

"Sister, dear sister, do please lie down, you may make yourself worse. I don't want you to die because of me."

But Pikčiurnienė was not to be soothed.

"Don't you count on getting something when I'm dead, my dear Barbė. I'm giving away nothing and I'm leaving nothing. All my life I've saved, all my life I've gathered everything like a squirrel filling its hole." Pikčiurnienė even began to weep, she was so sorry for herself. "But it wasn't to have it all taken away and squandered. You needn't look forward to me dying! Not one of you!"

Now it was Trudė's turn to be angry—Trudė, who always hated quarrels. But this was too much. She went up to the bed and took hold of her sister's arm.

"Buše, if you're afraid someone's going to touch your things, your clothes and all the rest of that wealth of yours, I shall go away at once. I don't want to have you lying there tormenting yourself with the idea that I'm looking after you because I want what you've got. Poor Buše! There you lie, sick, and all you can think of is your belongings, you curl up round them like a snake, ready to sting anybody that comes near. Ugh!"

That had its effect. Pikčiurnienė said nothing more but lay quietly, wiping the sweat from her face. She

they'll let it go cheap, they can't help it, they'll take anything if only they can get the money at once. And I've heard it's a pedigree cow and quite young. All it needs is good pasture."

Trudė slipped quietly out and went straight home. Magdė too was indignant, but dared not argue with her sister. Buše might get worse again—and that would mean looking after her. No chance to get on with her own work, no chance to get home for a bit and make dinner for her husband.

"All right, I'll go over," said Pikčiurna, and left.

But Barbė had not yet come to the end of her news. After waiting a moment or two, she started off again.

"And don't be too startled, Buše, I don't want to startle you. . . . Maybe I'd better not say anything. . . ."

"What? What's that?" Pikčiurnienė stirred in bed. "What else have you heard?"

"I didn't want to tell you because you're ill. But they say the Bergeshochs are selling their farm in Traiškiai. They've bought a lot of land at Stragainiai and they're going to live there now."

"Jokūbas! Where's that Jokūbas? Where's that good-for-nothing? He never knows anything, he never uses his head! I have to think of everything myself, everything! Trudė, give me some more coffee."

Magdė poured out the coffee.

"Trudė's gone. You know she never likes gossip. Now don't you get all upset, sister, let the Bergeshochs go wherever they want. One blood-sucker the less! They won't cheat folks round here any more. My husband made them a cart last year, but when it came to getting his money for it—he had to keep asking and asking, like a beggar, the Lord forbend—it makes you right down ashamed. They kept on putting it off and putting it off, and they haven't paid up to this very day. Are

they that poor, that we've got to make them a present of it?"

"You don't understand a thing!" cried Pikčiurnienė angrily. "All you think of is your own silly troubles. Those who've got nothing have nothing to worry about. What's your cart compared with—with— D'you think I'm going to let that rascal walk off with my money? What did I save it all up for? Nay, I'm not making him a present of it."

"Folks say, Buše, that he took your money and used it to turn a lot of peasants off their land to beg their bread. They say you helped that German landlord to squeeze our Lithuanians worse than before. . . . But I oughtn't to tell you all that," added Barbė in a distressed tone, "you'll only get ill again, and I'll feel it's my fault."

"What do I care what people say! But you, of course, you'd be only too glad if Bergeshoch swallowed up my eight thousand. . . . Give me some more coffee."

Pikčiurnienė would have told her sister a few more home truths, but she remembered that if Barbė had not come with her gossip, she, Buše, would have known nothing. Now she could make all her arrangements—and not without profit to herself.

And Pikčiurnienė's illness disappeared as though it had never been.

9

After this Pikčiurnienė seemed to change. She even talked to Malonienė sometimes. After all, she had to tell somebody all about her illness and how serious it had been.

She was kinder to her mother-in-law, too, for the old woman looked after the baby.

She bought a silk kerchief for the servant-girl Marė,

and gave the farm-hand a pair of white socks from her chest and the shirt which she had once let him wear for his sister's wedding.

Pikčiurnienė now invited her sisters to come and see her, not only when she wanted some work done, but like ordinary visitors. She still had no use for their husbands, however.

"Šnekutis is as silly as a sheep," she announced. "Šilbakis drinks like a fish. And that Būblys—well, Būblys—!"

But Trudė would not go anywhere without her Būblys. If you wanted to see Trudė, Būblys had to be invited too. And one day Būblys began expounding his views—that people shouldn't be dull clods, they ought to stand up like men and not grovel before the rich who exploited workers and squeezed out the last drop of their sweat. You work for them, help them to pile up wealth, and then they dare to say that everything belongs to them by right!

Pikčiurna sat listening open-mouthed—not a thing of it all could he understand. But Pikčiurnienė said that Būblys was too clever by half, she'd no use for that sort of thing and would he kindly keep his cleverness to himself.

"The Holy Scriptures tell us—"

What they told, however, she did not say, only added, "God gives no horns to a butting cow."

Barbė for her part was delighted to be friends with her rich sister. Perhaps Buše would soon be a real landed proprietor. What did it matter if she didn't like Šnekutis? It couldn't be helped. People can't all be alike.

Šnekutis did not lose any sleep over it, but one day, sharing a bottle with Pikčiurna in Priekulė, he called Buše a grab-all.

"You grab everything and hold on," he said, "and your old woman's the same! But I don't care. Just because of that I—" But he found no more to say.

Pikčiurna, however, decided that it had been said in jest, or not even jest, perhaps, but admiration. So he gave Šnekutis a friendly thump on the shoulder.

"Good man, Jonis, good man! You're just the kind I like. If it weren't for Buše—" And here Pikčiurna too stopped.

The brothers-in-law winked at each other in token of mutual understanding.

"Let's have another bottle," said Šnekutis.

Pikčiurna made no reply because he had no money to pay. Šnekutis guessed the snag.

"Don't worry, I'll pay," he added. "Those women of ours—you know, Buše and Barbė, are chips off the same block. . . . Sometimes I think what a fool I was. . . ."

But Pikčiurna never learned why his brother-in-law thought himself a fool. Pikčiurna had dozed off.

With the Šilbakises things went differently. Once Pikčiurnienė was up and about, Magdė did not come again. She had no desire for the honour, and Šilbakis was even more decided about it.

"I'm not going there. They can come to me if they want me."

It turned out that the Pikčiurnas really did want Šilbakis—as a skilled joiner. They hoped that he would charge less to relations. And after all, one is always needing something—a cart, or new wheels, or a table—a thousand-and-one things.

Pikčiurna appeared one day and, without even taking time to say "good-day," burst out: "Merčius! Merčius! Can you make a coffin? The baby's died. Just a small coffin, it'll be. Have you boards? Some kind or other?"

Pikčiurna had some boards himself, but Buše had strictly forbidden him even to mention them. After all, why saw up a good long plank for a small coffin? A joiner would be sure to have all sorts of odds and ends of wood lying around.

"I'll find some boards," said Šilbakis. "I can make an oak one, if you like."

"No, why should you? That'd probably cost a lot. . . . And maybe you'd make a table for me too? And I shall need a sledge for the winter."

One evening Pikčiurnienė herself dropped in on her sister Magdė as though just for a visit.

"I'm in trouble, Magdė, real trouble," she said.

"Why—what troubles can you have?"

"You can talk—you don't know how lucky you are. When you've got nothing, you've got no cares. Here I've my thread all warped, and I simply can't find time to do it. Those girls I have are no good for anything, they can't even weave! As soon as I've got the crops in, out they'll go! They can wash rags, that's all they're good for. Who's going to feed them till Christmas, I'd like to know, if they don't do a hand's turn for it? So as I was saying, there I am with all the field work starting, and my weaving's left on the loom till the autumn, getting covered with dust and dirt. I'll have all the neighbours laughing at me."

Now Magdė had little work of her own. She could do all that was needed on her tiny plot of land in a few days. Sometimes she did some dressmaking for the neighbours, but there was not much of that either.

"I can come and weave for you if you like," she offered.

That was just what Buše had been wanting.

"Of course I'd like it!" she cried gladly. "Only what shall I pay you? You can't do it for nothing. . . . And we're sisters, too. . . ."

"Oh, that's nothing to worry about," said Magdė good-naturedly, catching up Buše's words. "After all, you're my sister, you'll treat me fairly. My cow hasn't calved yet, let me have some milk or butter now and then."

"Of course I will! Of course! I'd never refuse you that!"

So Magdè set to work. She wove for one day, a second, a third. The work went fast. When she went home she was sometimes given a pot of milk or some cabbage soup for her husband. But as for butter—Pikčiurnienė said she was short of butter herself at the moment, later on, maybe....

But Magdè had no fat for the soup.

"How's that? Your husband works, you work.... You can see how many people I have to feed. You'll get it all right, don't worry. You're not starving yet."

Very well. Magdè made do with what she had and continued her weaving. The days became longer, and often in the evenings she went back again to help Marė—sometimes in the fields, sometimes with feeding the pigs or with the milking.

But the day when Magdè finished the weaving Pikčiurnienė was in a bad temper.

"When are you going to kick out that Šilbakis of yours? The land's your own, you bought it with your own money. You ought to get rid of that fool, I've told you so long ago."

Magdè was amazed. She turned and stared at Pikčiurnienė, wondering whether her sister had suddenly taken leave of her senses.

Apparently not. She was examining the spool. The spinning-wheel was shaky and worked badly.

"What was that you said?" asked Magdè.

"You heard me all right. Have you forgotten how you came along here complaining that he was a drunkard and often drank what he hadn't yet earned?"

Quite true. Magdè remembered that there had been one time when she had said something of the kind and very much regretted it later. After all, it had happened only once or twice, and then never again. And she re-

membered Pikčiurnienė's advice at the time—to get a divorce. But what else could you expect from Pikčiurnienė?

"And would you leave Pikčiurna just because somebody said you should?" asked Magdė.

"You let my Pikčiurna alone," snapped Buše, highly offended. "My Pikčiurna's a solid landowner. I don't have to go and look for work to feed him."

"Good Heavens! Have you quite lost your wits!" cried Magdė, really angry now. "If you hadn't asked me yourself, I'd certainly never have come to you for work. To others, maybe, but not to you. You have to drag your Pikčiurna home from the market blind drunk, everyone knows that! But when have I ever said a word about it? It's no business of mine."

"My Pikčiurna can drink if he wants. He's rich enough. But you'll never be rich with your Šilbakis. Mark my words—never! I told you not to marry him, but you wouldn't listen."

"I didn't listen then and I don't want to listen now. Let me alone! Got out of bed the wrong side this morning, or what? Spoiling for a quarrel? If all men were like my Merčius, it would be heaven on earth. At any rate my husband never beats me, I don't have to go running to the neighbours to hide."

Perhaps it would have been better if Magdė had left that last unsaid.

Pikčiurnienė flew into a fury. She jumped up from her chair, overturning the spinning-wheel, and shook her fist in Magdė's face.

"You shameless hussy! Miserable beggar!" she raved in a choked voice. "How dare you talk to me like that!"

Merciful Heavens—what a quarrel that was!

"Mangy gentry!" That was Magdė Šilbakienė's parting shot.

She ran out from behind the loom, slammed the door behind her and ran off home.

"What's happened?" asked Pikčiurna when he came home from the fields. "Why did Šilbakienė run off like that? She went flying past as though the devil were after her."

Pikčiurnienė poured out her complaints.

"Just think—lazy as they can be, not a thing do they want to do, and then put on airs! If I hadn't fed them they'd have starved. Every day she took something home with her. There's gratitude for you!"

"Yes, but what happened? She wouldn't run like that for nothing," said Pikčiurna. "You must have said something to her."

"Oh, indeed? If you want to know, she insulted you, the bitch! Am I to stand there meekly and hear my husband insulted?"

"D'you think I'm not man enough to stand up for myself? What did she say?" Pikčiurna enquired.

When the sisters quarrelled, his name was seldom mentioned. What could have happened today?

"She called you mangy gentry."

"Oh well, Mother, can't you see that's just envy? And you took offence! I look on it as a compliment."

"Get along with you, fool! D'you want to hear what else Magdė said? That I have to drag you home drunk from market every Saturday."

"What?" Pikčiurna gasped. "Well, that's what you always get for being good-natured. How many times I've lent them my horses, how many times—" But Pikčiurna could not remember anything else he had lent the Šilbakises. "There's gratitude for you!"

"You see? What did I tell you!" cried Pikčiurnienė with animation. "People like that—give them this and give them that, nothing but give and give—it's like pouring grain into a torn sack. But as soon as you dare

to say a single little word, then up they jump in a huff and away home. You know what we ought to do? Sue them!"

"Yes, Mother, that's what we'll do."

And they did.

Pikčiurna donned his best jacket, put money in his pocket and went off to the learned man of Benagai—the village clerk Šikšnius, who knew all the tricks. Šikšnius had spent some years in Germany—in prison, it is true, but still he knew German well; he could not only read and write it, he could draw up a complaint and put it through.

Šikšnius wrote that Pikčiurna had driven the Šilbakises home from market so and so many times, had lent them horses to fetch wood and for ploughing, had given them rye, had given them barley and oats for pig feed, had given them seed potatoes. Pikčiurnienė had given them bread, and lard, and milk, and pickled cabbage, and butter.

Pikčiurna wanted to add that Magdė had been given supper to take home to her husband, but Šikšnius persuaded him to leave that out.

"That'll only make the gentlemen laugh."

Šikšnius then reckoned it all up in money, and it came to quite a good sum. This ingenious and well-phrased complaint, with a large number of stamps to go with it (to pay the court tax, Šikšnius explained) was then handed in by Pikčiurna.

"Now they'll have to pay us for everything! Every single thing! I shan't let them off a *groschen*. The judge will support the solid farmer, not a pauper."

The judge ruled for Pikčiurna, and that day he was drunk as he had never been before.

Pikčiurnienė was angry, but he cut her scolding short.

"What does it matter, Mother? The Šilbakises'll pay for it all. If you're rich you always come out on top."

It's an ungrateful world. Marė Kalvelikė left the Pikčiurnas, went off and did not come back. If she alone had gone it would not have been so bad, but the man had to go too! And all for nothing at all!

What if the mistress did tell them to get their lazy bones out of bed earlier and work for their living! If she said it, she had reason. The sow had overlaid one of the pigs, the best and strongest of the litter. And all because that Marė hadn't watched her.

"What do I feed you for if you can't even keep an eye on the sow?" Pikčiurnienė screamed. "Too much work? The fields? The cows? The calves? The pigs? What d'you think you're here for? Expect to lie abed and have me bring you your breakfast on a silver tray? I hire you to work. When Christmas comes you'll start whining about low wages, and wanting presents! Didn't I give you a silk kerchief? It's not every farmer's daughter has a kerchief like that. And here's your gratitude!"

"Find someone better, then," said Marė, and left.

"Good-for-nothing wench!"

When Marė left the house, Pikčiurnienė demanded the silk kerchief and woven belt back again, and with her own hands snatched them out of the girl's bundle.

Then that labourer, just as big a scoundrel, announced that if Marė left he was going too, because without her he'd starve to death.

"So that's what's been going on! So Marė's been stealing right and left to stuff that fellow's mouth! What people! What people!"

But she did not manage to get her presents back from the man.

"Go to hell!" he said briefly when his mistress wanted the shirt and socks, and marched off whistling.

Pikčiurnienė sent the bailiff to fetch Marė back—which

gave people a good laugh, because as the bailiff went in at one door, Marė slipped out at another.

Here it was, harvest-time, work piling up and no labourers to be got. Buše even tried putting advertisements in the paper for a servant-girl. But not a single one appeared—it was like a conspiracy against her. The bitches!

But then came events, such events that all previous joys faded to insignificance, and previous troubles became mere flea-bites, completely forgotten. The most important event was that the Traiškiai estate was put up for sale—not as a whole, but in sections, and not by the bank, but by von Bergeshoch himself; he would get more for it that way.

Since almost all Pikčiurnienė's spare money was in von Bergeshoch's pocket, or rather in his land bought in another, more convenient place, she now had an excellent opportunity to become a landed proprietor, although not yet the proprietor of an estate, for to buy the whole of Traiškiai—that was too big a mouthful.

Still, the Pikčiurnas got a good solid slice. It was some distance from their own fields, that was true, but it lay right alongside the Benagiai-Traiškiai highway. Excellent! They could send the stock along the road, and they could drive along it themselves. A long way? Well, maybe it was. But what were labourers for? After all, she, Buše, would not have to go herself every day. And Pikčiurna could go on horseback. Then he really would look a gentleman.

It could have been better, of course. Pikčiurnienė would really have liked to get the very middle of the Traiškiai manor. But things don't always turn out exactly the way you want. That restaurant-keeper Keilis from Priekulė snapped it up right under her nose. He could pay the whole sum right down on the nail—a pretty big sum, more than Pikčiurnienė could produce

at a moment's notice. That rascally Keilis had pushed the price up sky-high with his bidding.

Well, never mind. All the same Pikčiurnienė's land had more than doubled. She celebrated the occasion by buying a pedigree mare and a number of cows.

But the most important thing of all was that the Pikčiurnas had got one of the von Bergeshoch carriages. A carriage! Pikčiurnienė would not have to rattle along in a cart any more. Now all she dreamed of was getting a coachman and driving to market in style. That would make the people stare. "Look at Buše Karnelikė!" they would say.

However, it was still early to think of all that; the important thing at present was to find labourers, working hands.

They'll come along, she thought, they'll come running.

Incidentally, a number of labourers who had worked on the von Bergeshoch estate lived in a cottage on the land Pikčiurnienė had bought.

Buše was really happy. Overnight, so to speak, she had become the owner of a really big farm, almost an estate. It was a pity she had to live in that Benagai among people like Malonė and Pluta. However—

The day after the sale Pikčiurnienė went to the labourers' cottage on her new land, to make her ownership known. The labourers, however, were scattered about the yard. Luckily it was a small one, if she spoke loudly they could all hear her.

"Good-morning! I am your mistress now. Do you know that?" she said, smiling.

"We wouldn't have, if you hadn't told us," grunted one of the men, but Pikčiurnienė did not see who it was.

This shook her self-assurance somewhat. She had expected a different reception. But never mind, Pikčiurnienė knew what to do.

"You'll take your orders from me now."

The labourers sat or stood, looking her up and down from head to foot, until the silence was broken by one of the women, Paleikienė.

"We knew that you'd bought the land, of course, Buše. . . . But after all, you're a peasant too, you'll treat us right."

"You be quiet!" Paleikis growled at his wife. But she took no notice. Well, what can you do with a woman?

"Be quiet yourself! I'm talking to an old friend, I am!" she snapped back. "We sat on the same bench at school. We heard our first sermon together and took our first Communion together too. And then—"

But Pikčiurnienė only coughed, straightened her kerchief, pushed back a strand of hair, then smoothed it from her temples with both hands and announced, "Paleikienė, I'm not Buše to you or an old friend either. I'm your mistress. Please understand that." She let her eyes travel proudly round all the labourers, coughed again and continued: "And I don't like it when labourers get too familiar. Remember that too. What's past is gone. And now here are your orders. Tomorrow we're bringing the cattle here. Paleikienė, you will look after them. Water them three times a day. I'll send a girl to do the milking and you'll help her. Understand? In the evening don't drive the cows home, we leave them here, in that cow shed. See they have enough straw. There's plenty here."

"You're clean off your head!" cried Šniaukštienė, a woman with a ready tongue. "Your cows in that shed? And what about ours? Put them on the roof, or what? And our pigs under the bed? And our chickens on the trees? And want to use our straw too! Got none of your own?"

"What's that?" cried Buše in amazement. "You don't want to obey my orders? As for your cows, you're not

going to keep any. I won't allow it. For your pigs you can find some sort of shelter. Hens you won't keep either. I shan't say anything about that this year, but next year there'll be an end of it. All this is going to be ploughed and sown, and I'm not having your hens all over my fields. . . . Oh, by the way, you can sell me your cows. I'll pay you whatever they're worth. You can get milk." She wanted to say, "At the manor" but thought better of it, and concluded, "From me."

"Of all the dirty bitches!" cried Šniaukštienė so loudly that Šniaukšta did not know how to quieten her.

"Hold your tongue, Urtė!" he shouted.

"Me? Hold my tongue? Who for? Hold my tongue for her? So she can trample on me? Even the Bergeshochs didn't try anything like this! And this is one of our own, a Lithuanian. I'm not giving her my cow, not for anything, she can stand on her head before she gets it! Ugh—you skinflint—may your riches choke you. How can the earth bear your foot! Why doesn't it open and drop you down to your master in Hell?"

"Šniaukštienė, remember who you're talking to!" said Pikčiurnienė threateningly.

"Who? A blood-sucker! A vampire that drinks people's blood! But don't you think we're all so simple as to let you trample on us!"

"Hold your tongue! I've never drunk your blood. I could put you all out this very day if I wanted, send you away to beg your bread. But I've too good a heart. I wouldn't do it! I'm sorry for you. I'll give you work, and pay you for it."

Pikčiurnienė was angry enough, of course, but she needed working hands. So she restrained herself and spoke mildly, even ingratiatingly.

"I'll overlook what you said, Šniaukštienė. You can come tomorrow and I'll give you work too. You can look after the pigs until I find a girl."

"I'm not going to work for that woman!" said Šniaukštienė obstinately. "You hear me? I'd sooner starve! Jonis, go and get us work somewhere else. We'll find a corner somewhere in the world without any Pikčiurnienė. Can't even talk to folks decently!"

"What are you making all that noise about?" said Šniaukšta. "Of course we're going, but we'll go when it suits us, not when Pikčiurnienė takes it into her head to tell us." And Šniaukšta lighted a cigarette, tossing the match right at Pikčiurnienė's feet.

She was struck dumb. And Paleikis turned to Šniaukšta, saying loudly, "You know, neighbour, Pikčiurnienė seems to think she's bought us together with the land! Live property! Like slaves." He turned to the new mistress. "And what about us men, haven't you any orders for us, Buše dear?"

Pikčiurnienė went crimson, then white. The worthless good-for-nothings! Didn't want to treat her as the mistress, as the lady of the manor, even called her by her Christian name! They'd never have dared try such insolence with the Bergeshochs. Probably bowed and said, "My lady." Ugh—when would she teach them their place! Yes, she could feel their contempt, she was fully aware of it, but this wasn't the time to storm at them. She had to have labourers, she needed them like the air she breathed. So she swallowed her rage.

"You won't be left without work either. Come tomorrow to—" The word "manor-house" was on the tip of her tongue again. She did so want to say, "Come to the manor-house!" But the Pikčiurnas' farm-house—how could you call that a manor?... A disgrace to live in such a place now.

"The master will give you your work. It's for him to say what you'll do."

What a laugh there was at that. One and all held their sides. Even the hens squawked.

No, Pikčiurnienė had never even dreamed it would be so difficult to deal with these labourers. She had thought she would come, give her orders, set them to work—and that was all. But how did it end? Up got Paleikis—tall and broad enough to make two of Pikčiurna—up he got, hands in his trousers pockets, strolled over to her, swaying a little as though the earth were resilient (he had once been a sailor), took one hand out of his pocket, removed his pipe from his mouth, spat heartily, replaced his pipe between his teeth and put his hands on Pikčiurnienė's shoulder. She felt as though it were pressing her to the ground.

"Buše, do you remember how we used to fight at school, when we were children? You always used to beat the other kids. You always liked a fight. I remember it very well."

"What's school got to do with it? Why d'you all keep harping on school?" snapped Buše.

"Keep cool! D'you know I once wanted to marry you? Yes, but d'you know why? So that once at least I could give you the hiding you deserved. But it turned out differently—because I met my good wife here. But you liked me, didn't you? Maybe you'd like me now?... I rather think you'd be glad to change your Pikčiurna for me. And give a barrel of honey for the change! Wouldn't you?"

Now was there ever such an impudent fellow as that Paleikis—what could you do with a boor like that! And there was his wife standing by, listening. Buše only wished the earth would open and swallow them all.

"But I wouldn't change my good wife for you. She's not a hell-cat like you are. Aye! And there's one other thing you'd better remember. You've bought land in Traiškiai. How you've got hold of it is none of my business. But don't start thinking you've bought us together with the land. Bergeshoch didn't keep his contract with

us, that's true. He filled his pockets here and cleared off to Stragainiai. And he'll set up his traps there for poor peasants in Benagiai and other villages round about. He'll catch them all right—he's the devil's own son. Especially as Pikčiurnienė's been so generous lending him money and scooping up as much as she can herself."

"What business is it of yours what *Herr* von Bergheshoch and I do?" Pikčiurnienė felt she had to defend the landlord as well as herself.

"What business?" Paleikis repeated. "It's my business when more people have to hire out as labourers because of you!"

"So you want to run off?"

"I'm free as a bird. My wings aren't clipped. A poor man's bread tastes the same everywhere. But you—you'll never get away. Except to that hill!" And Paleikis jerked his head towards the cemetery.

"What nonsense are you talking? What's the cemetery got to do with it?"

"You wait a bit, I haven't finished yet. You've got no contract with us and you won't have. We don't sign contracts with the likes of you. My wife doesn't have to herd your cows. And I don't have to work for you either. You've just made a very big mistake. Get that?"

Wants to make me beg him to stop, the swine, thought Pikčiurnienė. The thought was sharp as a knife. No, she'd cut her tongue out first, she'd go on her knees all the way from Traiškiai to Benagiai, but plead with these worthless scamps—no, never! She had opened her mouth to say as much when Paleikis spoke again.

"We don't mind working for you," he said, "but on free hire terms, not as contracted labourers. We can come to some agreement that way. Understand, Buše? Tell your Jokūbas to come and talk it over if he doesn't want this house to be empty until the autumn, and we'll see

how much he's ready to pay the men and how much the women. I think you've seen our women aren't rabbits, they won't let you do as you want with them. They know their worth, too. If you treat us decently we'll treat you decently. But all you can do is puff yourself up like a turkey-cock. You'll get nowhere that way. You can't dazzle us and you can't frighten us. Tell your Pikčiurna if he offers us less than we'd get, say, at the sawmills, we aren't having any. We'll work off our rent, and he won't see any more of us! And remember another thing," and Paleikis shook a large finger under Buše's very nose. "You're not going to starve us as you do your servant-girls. You'll have to feed us like human beings! Do you understand that or not?"

Pikčiurnienė hurried home, humiliated and shamed like a girl who had been rated, racking her brains over what to do with the labourers. Before she got there, however, she had calmed down, thought everything over very coolly and decided how to act.

But calm as she was, even very calm outwardly, Paleikis' heavy hand had left her disturbed.

"Heavens above," she sighed, "I'm not some silly girl!" But it was pleasant to dream for a moment, just a moment.

Yes, she would not have been ashamed to have a husband like Paleikis! Why hadn't he asked for her? But no! God orders all things for the best. If he had asked, who knows—perhaps her heart would have betrayed her. And then what would have happened? Could he ever have given her that firm ground under her feet she had always wanted? A good farm is like a loaded cart—both horses must pull well. But would Paleikis have pulled? No! He was of a different breed. Now Pikčiurna—he might be nothing much, but still, you could get along with him.

Pikčiurnienė had two children—Jurgis and Jokūbėlis. Jurgis was the older, Jokūbėlis the younger. Buše had had others, but they had all died.

As long as the old mother-in-law lived, it was she who brought up the children. She taught them their prayers, and taught them it was wicked to swear.

"Eh, what's that, you little rascallions, using these bad words again? You'll go to hell for that, and the devil and his imps'll spear you with pitchforks like frogs and toss you from cauldron to cauldron! Play ball with you!"

That was the education they got at home. At school they were taught other things. As soon as they knew their alphabet and the multiplication table, they started off with the history of the German Kaisers. It was most important to know how great Barbarossa had been, how invincible Friedrich der Grosse, and how peaceable all the Wilhelms. But really to absorb all things German, it was necessary to talk German. Absolutely necessary! At home they could do as they liked—at least, for the present. But at school! . . .

Jurgis, whose mother sometimes in her heart called him a "useless gawk," often forgot and began talking Lithuanian at school. The result was an unpleasantly close acquaintance with the cane.

When he complained at home one day and displayed his swollen palms, Pikčiurna raged and said he'd go to the school and give that teacher a taste of his own stick. But Buše soon put a stop to anything like that.

"Don't be a fool! A child's got to learn his lessons and do as he's told. If he's no good for anything at home, let the teacher try and make something of him. And as for German— How far will you ever get with Lithuanian? As far as Priekulė, maybe! And even there it's no good if you have to talk to officials!"

The father was forced to agree. And the son thought it over.

The result was that Jurgis turned from a "gawk" into a real German, body and soul.

*Ja, mit Herz und Hand,
Mit dem Säbel in der Hand,
Fürs Vaterland!*

When the old grandmother died, Jurgis was already a big lad and knew German well. The education of Jokūbėlis passed into his father's hands. And the father would say, "Always remember, my son—"

Incidentally, Pikčiurna said "my son" only when he was a bit uplifted. But he was uplifted only when he felt safe. And he felt safe only when Buše was nowhere round about, because she always had to interfere.

"He's my son, not yours!" she would correct her husband sternly.

The father found nothing to say, so he said nothing. But when his wife was out of hearing, he would start again, "Always remember, my son, when you're on your own farm, keep your fences mended."

Pikčiurna believed firmly that this injunction contained the beginning and the end of all wisdom. He had received it from his father, who had received it earlier from *his* father.

"Ruin always begins with the fences," Pikčiurna continued. "Look at—"

However, of the neighbouring farm-houses only that of Jonis Malonė had neither fence nor gate, and a roof almost falling to pieces. But since Malonė kept his head above water somehow and obstinately refused to be ruined, he could hardly be held up as an example. So Pikčiurna had to let it go at that.

Very soon, indeed, the Pikčiurnas themselves had no more fences—at least, no fences surrounding the farm-

house and yard. There was still a certain amount of fencing, of course, and it was always kept in excellent repair, but when the Pikčiurnas bought all their new land, the old fences began to be pulled down—at first little by little, then pretty rapidly, because huge farm buildings were going up in their place. It was a real manor! On the south side was the house—very much like the one at Traiškiai, on the north was the hayloft, and on the west, the sheds, barns, cow-house and stables. On the eastern side—the side where the Malonès lived—Pikčiurnienė put up shelters for carts, wood and machinery. And at the end of the shelters she built a poultry-house with a special section for geese—another slap in the face for the Malonès.

For although Buše's hope that Malonė would be ruined had so far come to nothing, her disposition of the farm buildings was planned with an eye to possibilities. Malonė's yard would make an excellent poultry-yard; there was even a pond for geese, it only needed cleaning out and deepening.

Now the Pikčiurnas' farm-house really was like a manor. No fences, only farm buildings, with gates between them on all four sides. On the Malonès' side, of course, a gate was not really necessary, there was nowhere to go; but never mind, let it stand there! And not only a big gate for carts, but a wicket gate too. Let those Malonès see that Pikčiurnienė had her eye on them!

When war broke out in 1914 Pikčiurnienė rejoiced. She had debts, and she felt war would be her salvation. And even more than that. People would be glad to work for a crust of bread now. Everyone knew that there was always hunger in war-time, and after it too!

There was only one fly in the ointment; her son Jurgis announced that he was going to volunteer for the army at once. Volunteer! He was barely nineteen, he would not be called up for some time yet.

"Think what you're doing, Jurgis," Pikčiurnienė cried angrily. "Are you starving here at home? Are you badly off? What more do you want? You must have taken leave of your senses."

But Jurgis was a reticent youth, so reticent that it was sometimes hard to guess what his thoughts really were. And so it was on this occasion.

"Maybe," was all he had to say.

"D'you want to be killed like a dog out there? D'you want to have the crows pick out your eyes? D'you want—" Pikčiurnienė did not know what else to predict, still worse.

And again her son had his answer.

"You said yourself, Mother, that this war would be a good thing for us!"

So Jurgis went to the front, and Pikčiurnienė soon forgot about him because she was busy all day—she had to take full advantage of the situation.

12

*In our fine village, Benagai,
We've birds of every kind and shape;
Jurgis like a clever fledgeling
Heard the guns, flew off to gape.*

There were no other volunteers in Benagai, although it was considered a big village. It even had a poet of its own—which was more than any other village round about could boast of.

Incidentally, it was this poet who saved Jurgis from being completely forgotten. By his song about the "clever fledgeling" he also saved the honour of his village, for Jurgis Pikčiurna, a noble son of Benagai, was the first volunteer and—the last! Others waited more or less quietly until they were called up; when their papers did

come, and when they left, they ground their teeth. "These devils can never let us live in peace! What did they have to start this cursed war for?"

It never occurred to any of them that they were being called to defend their fatherland.

Buše Pikčiurnienė was badly frightened when she first heard gun-fire at the border. For that border ran quite close, only two or three miles away. So when the guns roared, she ran out of the house and began digging a pit with her own hands.

"Marė! Išė! Anė! Bring the grain here! I'll go and bury the clothes. If they come here they'll rob us of everything! And not a man in the house—nothing you can call a man!"

The grain and clothing were buried. But what could she do about the buildings and live-stock? You can't bury those. But if . . . if—!

"Folks say there's no end of Russians there at the border, and all coming our way! Almighty God, save and preserve us!" she prayed.

She quickly harnessed horses to a cart which had been standing ready loaded, and made off with her son, leaving Pikčiurna to look after the house and everything else.

Pikčiurnienė went no farther than Priekulė, however. She found such crowds and such a bustle there that she even forgot the danger.

"Look, look—Jokūbėlis—over there! Who's that officer?"

"Why, it's that Bergeshoch. Didn't you recognize him?"

"Jokūbėlis, you should say '*Herr* von Bergeshoch'! You can't call a gentleman 'that Bergeshoch.'"

"Why, he didn't hear me, did he?"

Von Bergeshoch had neither heard nor seen anything of them; he was busy shouting at a soldier who was

holding an uneasy, foam-spattered horse. Pikčiurnienė hurried over to him.

"How do you do, *Herr Kapitän*," she said politely.

Von Bergeshoch turned with an angry look at this woman who presumed to lower his rank.

"Was? Was? Aha! Pikčiurnienė? How do you do, how do you do. But I am an *Oberst*, please address me as such."

Pikčiurnienė felt as though the *Herr Oberst* had poured a bucket of cold water over her. She had disgraced herself! But how could she have known what rank he had?

"And so you have to go to the front too, *Herr Oberst*? But you're not a young man."

"For us officers there is no such thing as age," *Herr von Bergeshoch* cut her short. "And thank God for it! Do you know the age of His Excellency *Herr von Hindenburg*?"

No, Pikčiurnienė did not know. All she could remember about the general was his moustache—she had seen his picture in the paper. She nodded, trying to think of something more to say.

"Well, if gentlemen like you and *Herr von Hindenburg* are going to the front, then the Russians will never come! Are you taking your horse with you?"

"No, the Russians will never come, Pikčiurnienė! You can make your mind easy about that. Very soon the frontier will be pushed back to the Urals. And then we shall no longer have to live as we have been living. We shall no longer be cramped and compressed as though in a vice! His Majesty the Kaiser knows what he is doing! And what we Germans undertake, we carry out thoroughly!... Well, *auf Wiedersehen*, I'm in a hurry."

Where the Urals were Pikčiurnienė did not know, so she decided that it must be a very long way off. A weight seemed to roll off her heart. If that was the way things were, she could very well return home.

She badly wanted to boast to von Bergeshoch about her son who had volunteered, but he had already turned his back and was walking towards the station. Pikčiurnienė hurried to Balas' restaurant—she might find other people she knew there.

She did.

There sat Kojelis and Staigis. What, was Staigis going to the front too? He had two fingers missing on his right hand! But no, he was simply seeing his brother off. And who was that—not Paleikis? Yes, Paleikis! How had he got here? Pikčiurnienė had not seen him since he left the estate.

She was very anxious to hear what they were talking about, so she edged closer, trying to look as though she were wanting to buy something. And she heard.

"What's it all got to do with us Lithuanians?" said Kojelis. "What fatherland have we got? If you haven't the right to talk Lithuanian when you're living in your own land, if you aren't even allowed to call yourself Lithuanian, where's your fatherland? I suppose it's all going to start again, the way it was when we were serving our time in the army. You say, '*Der Gewehr*,' and you're politely told, '*Das Gewehr, du Schafskopf!*' You say, '*Das Gewehr*lauf,' and you get, '*Der Gewehr*lauf, du Idiot!' Make a fool of you to amuse the others. Or order you to scrub the barrack floor with a tooth-brush. . . . And all because you've got *Litauer* on your papers. But we've got to go all the same. You may escape getting killed by the enemy, but you won't escape the German bullet marked 'deserter' if you try to run away."

"That's true enough," said Staigis' brother. "But why should I have to go and fight other people's quarrels? What's he got to do with me, that Austrian archduke?"

"That's not what it's really all about, lad. Talk sense!" Paleikis said drily, and laughed. "We've got too many generals running about looking for something to do. And

it's not only work they want, it's glory too. They're getting bored with hanging round barracks. And then there's the Krupp factories—what about them? They've got so many guns, they've no place to store them."

"Going rusty for want of use," grinned Staigis. "And they may get out of date too!"

"And then there's new colonies wanted," Paleikis went on. "Well, come on, mates. We'll go and get our rifles, and then it'll be time to think about whom we'll fire them at!"

"Traitors!" howled Pikčiurnienė, seizing Jokubėlis' sleeve. "Call yourselves soldiers? And there's my son—"

A burst of laughter from four throats followed Pikčiurnienė as she ran out, her hands up to her ears.

But all the papers were shouting: "*Der König rief, und alle, alle kamen!*" and printing pictures of soldiers raring to be up and at 'em.

The first war-time autumn did not promise much. Everybody was saying it could not last long, it would all be over by Christmas. The papers said that, so did the German officers. And if there was anybody who still did not believe it, he need only go to the fortune-teller in the town, and she told him exactly the same thing.

So there you are, Mrs. Pikčiurnienė, Buše laughed sourly at herself. The war'll be over by Christmas. And it'll end with a great victory. All the prices'll go down. What are you going to do then?

Weeks passed into months, and when she wanted to buy rice, sugar or raisins, the shopkeeper refused to give them to her, not for any money. What times!

The next year, however, things were better. Farm produce began going up. Money was reckoned in hundreds, in thousands.

Then . . . then came golden days. When she drove into town, people would come running after the cart: "Have you any butter? Have you any milk? Have you any eggs?"

Have you any bread? Have you—" You could even swindle them. Nobody ever tasted the butter, for instance, to see if it was good or not, whether it was fresh or over-salted. You could easily mix curds with it, or mashed potatoes. Who would stop to argue? And the prices you could get—!

There were plenty of working hands to be got, too. Some of her labourers even had papers marked *Ausländer*. They had a gendarme in charge of them, and had no right either to return home or to change their place of residence. And if one of them showed the faintest sign of dissatisfaction, the gendarme was right there by him in a minute.

Pikčiurnienė got four French prisoners-of-war. And now she was really angry with her son for joining the army when there was no need. If Jurgis had been at home, he would have been given a gun and told to guard the prisoners. Then the assignment could have been made permanent, and he would have served at home till the end of the war. Whereas now they had sent a disabled soldier from town, and he had to be given good food, a room and clean bedding. Had Jurgis been at home there would have been no need to feed a lazy rascal like that. If he'd only made himself useful, at least! But no, not a thing would he touch. He'd go to the field with the prisoners, sit there smoking, and even—think of it, was he a bit soft, a zany, or what?—even give the prisoners cigarettes, talk to them, laugh with them!

But that was not the whole of it. He actually dared to give orders to her—her, Pikčiurnienė! Told her how she was to feed the prisoners! But she wasn't the woman to stand for that.

"Oh no, my dear *Herr* Rotold!" she said. "I have my regulations from headquarters. Look!" and she flourished a paper under his nose. "Here it is, all down in black and white—what's proper for the prisoners and what isn't!"

"Very good!" Rotold agreed. "But according to the instructions they are not supposed to work such hours—from early morning to night."

Pikčiurnienė stood her ground. And then that rascally guard—imagine it!—ordered the prisoners to work eight hours and not a minute over.

No, it was too much—that drone had gone clean off his head, he'd got a bit above himself. He stood by the door of the closet where the prisoners slept, watch in hand, waiting until the hand reached the exact minute.

"Lord God Almighty! Get them up! Are you going to let them sleep till dinner-time?" cried Pikčiurnienė, losing patience. "They still have to wash and dress, and they take five hours to eat."

When they were working, that toad would stand there again with his watch in his hand, to make sure that they didn't work an extra minute.

"But *Herr* Rotold, we'll go bankrupt this way!" Pikčiurnienė turned to pleading.

"*Frau* Pikčiurnienė, it is according to regulations from headquarters."

Pikčiurnienė made a trip to town—not, of course, with empty hands. A few days later she had five prisoners and another guard.

Eh dear me, she thought, it's fight here and fight there, and grease people's palms all round if you want to make a living. . . . That Jokūbėlis is just a whelp yet. If he were a few years older, now, he could get a rifle and guard the prisoners.

Jokūbėlis was much disappointed with the French. In school he had learned a song, "*Franzosen mit roten Hosen*," and he could not see a single one who wore them.

Yes, Jokūbėlis was still going to school, and there he learned to feel that he was *ein echter Deutscher*. A most patriotic song helped to convince him of it.

*Ich bin ein Preusse,
Kennt ihr meine Farben?
Die Fahne schwebt
Mir schwarzweissrot voraus.*

At home, however, thanks to his father, he sang the same song in Lithuanian.

*I am a Prussian,
Do you know me?
My banner black and white!*

There was a certain discrepancy—in German there were three colours, in Lithuanian only two. H'm. But if that was the way it was sung, then it must be right, thought Jokūbėlis.

He learned to recite verses too. For example: *Deutschland, mein Deutschland, du darfst nicht untergehen!* And others of the same kind. One day he brought the teacher twenty-five silver marks for the war loan. His father had given it to him when Buše was not about.

"Take it," he said, "we've got to win the war. And if we don't give anything, we won't!"

One might have thought, from the look on his face, that the only thing still needed for victory was that twenty-five marks.

Once Jokūbėlis even gathered stinging nettles under the fence for the war. His mother allowed him to take stinging nettles out of the farm—they did not have to be sown or reaped.

13

In the second year of the war Būblys was called up. "If things get too hard, go to the Staigises," he told Trudė when he left. "I've spoken to them. And when I

come back, dear, you'll see how different everything will be."

Trudé Būblienė, left alone, did not at first know where to turn or how to occupy herself. The world seemed very dark, she could see no ray of light anywhere. Not one of her sisters was alone like she was.

Magdė was in difficult straits, that was true, but she had her husband at home with her. It's always easier to bear things together. And she had children—two daughters and a son. Šilbakis found plenty of jobs, there were fewer joiners in the village now. But Magdė moaned as much as ever—more, in fact.

"The only good thing is that Šilbakis gets his food when he goes out to work," she said. "For what he earns in a week won't buy us a pound of butter! And we have to buy it. We've only one cow and it doesn't give milk all the year round at that."

When Barbė's son was called up, she took to her bed. She said she wanted nothing, she only wanted to die. She was tired of such a life. Her pride, her only joy, her best beloved child was being driven to the slaughter! And the kind that were left at home! The less said about them, the better.

So Barbė lay in bed weeping and groaning. There was no doctor in Priekulė, he had left for the front, and it was a long way to the nearest town. Trudė could not tell what ailed her sister. Barbė said she had an ache here and a pain there, and she did not want to eat, she was sure that she could not force anything down.

"But I ought to eat all the same," she added, "or I shall lose my strength."

So she ate, and ate heartily. Trudė had to bake buns and see they were sweet enough. Trudė had to buy meat and see it was really good. Trudė had to find fish—and freshly caught. Trudė had to get hold of vegetables, and dried fruit, and real coffee.

"Soup made of dried fruit with dumplings—how good that is, and how nourishing!" Barbè's tears began to dry.

"Barbè dear," Trudè chided her gently, "if Buše ate all this I wouldn't be surprised. But you ought to remember that it's war-time, soon the reserves will give out. I had to go round all the shops today before I could find coffee, and the shopkeeper told me I'd got the very last dried fruit."

"Do you grudge a little trouble to get food for your sick sister?" asked Barbè, in a dudgeon. "Buše indeed! Who's there to stop her eating anything she wants? Oh, by the way, do you know what she suggested? That I should sell her our farm. What do you think of that?"

"Barbè, open your eyes and look at what Buše's about, and then decide."

"Why, God Himself's helping her! Trudè! Trudè dear! I know you envy her. And your husband envies everybody!"

"No, Barbè! I haven't sunk to envying her yet! Tell me—the way our sister lives, is it anything to be proud of?"

"What's being proud got to do with it? She was the first to talk of buying our land, I'd never have thought of it! I was driving from Priekulė with her in her carriage not long ago. And suddenly she said to me, 'Why do you keep on toiling and moiling? Sell me that farm of yours, you'll not regret it!' Well, what do you say to that?"

"Oh, of course! And so she thinks you'll go running to sell her your farm now? But I'm not surprised at her. She'd swallow up the whole of Benagai if she could! I heard she'd been talking to the Šilbakises about buying their land too. But Šilbakis just laughed and said he wasn't going to jump into her net. You see! And you want to let yourself get pulled in. But I don't understand what she wants with Šilbakis' land. It's only three or

four acres, wedged in between other people's fields. No room to move on it."

"Why talk about Šilbakis? We've got much more!" Barbė boasted.

"Yes, of course, your land's better for her. But think where her fields are, and yours. Of course, if there wasn't Pluta's land in between.... Pluta.... Just a minute, I think I see what the idea is. Pikčiurnienė wants to set a trap for Pluta! Barbė, if you've a scrap of decent feeling, you won't help her!"

Barbė, however, ignored her sister's last words.

"If she paid a good price," Barbė mused, "I might consider selling."

"I see you've really got it fixed in your head."

"She said we could either go and live in town, or stop here if we wanted. She'd give us maintenance as long as we lived. That wouldn't be so bad, would it?"

"And what does your husband say to it?"

"Jonis? He doesn't know himself what he wants! Sometimes he says, 'Maybe it would be a good thing! There'll be less work. And we won't have to mend the fences and the roofs,' and then he turns round and says, 'No, I'm not going to jump into her mouth!'"

"Barbė, Barbė, you'll soon be an old woman and you haven't learned a scrap of sense yet! What will your children do?"

"I can't always be thinking of them! Marė's of an age to marry, and my Kriziukas is sickly. Pikčiurnienė says it might be possible to get him taken in at some invalid home."

"Well, have it your own way."

That was the end of it. Šnekutienė returned to her eternal obsession.

"Trudė dear, what can you give me to eat? If only you'd make me some pancakes! I'm getting quite weak!"

"You know, Barbė, I do think you'd feel much better if

you got up a bit. If you keep on stopping in bed you really will get weak, you may even lose the use of your legs altogether."

"It's easy for you to talk!" snorted Barbė in a huff. "I'd have got up long ago if I could! O-o-oh! What a pain—what a pain in my stomach!"

"Again? It's from eating too many sweet things!"

Trudė got thin and worn looking after her invalid sister, while the invalid waxed plump. But when neither Šnekutis' wages nor any other money coming in was enough to satisfy Barbė's demands for dainties and she asked Trudė to be a kind sister and lend her some, Trudė's patience came to an end, she left and did not come back.

Barbė wept, Barbė raged, and then at last Barbė rose and went to Pikčiurnienė.

Pluta of Benagai was at the front too, Plutienė was alone with her six children, and expecting a seventh.

The seventh came, leaving her very ill; there was not only want in the house—stark hunger looked out of the frightened eyes of the children.

Trudė brought them all she had, but that was little enough.

"What do you think—shall I ask Pikčiurnienė for some milk?" Plutienė asked her. "She promised to let me have some if I needed it."

"And how much has she given you?" asked Trudė. "None? And haven't you ever needed it up to now?"

"Yes...."

Trudė brought her goat over to Plutienė's house.

"Let it graze by the fence," she said. "There'll be a little milk for the smaller ones, anyhow. And when you get better we may manage to buy a cow for the two of us. We'll scrape up the money somehow."

"If my calf hadn't died, we'd have milk," sighed Plutienė.

"Now don't you worry, you just get well again. When you're on your feet, everything will be all right."

"I feel as though I'd never be well again. Oh dear, oh dear, I'm no good for anything!" Plutienė wept.

Trudė scolded her, but she could hardly restrain her own tears. She was sorry for the children who rarely left their sick mother's bedside.

"When your husband comes home again, everything will be quite different," Trudė comforted her. "Now don't cry! I'll help you all I can, things'll be easier when we face them together. After all, the war won't last for ever!"

Trudė herself was in need of help and support. But she said nothing. Amid all the grief of the war one joy had come to her—she was going to have a baby.

She had to think seriously about her situation. So she wrote a letter to her sister Buše.

"Dear sister," she wrote. "I cannot wait any longer. I need money. You know that I am quite alone. I am not writing this to make you feel sorry for me, I know you have no use for such nonsense. And I do not want it. But I do ask you, please, to return my money, I have urgent need of it. I do not ask for interest, although after all these years it would come to a good sum. I hope you will understand me and send the money as soon as possible. It should not be difficult now with money so cheap. The chest you can keep."

She sent the letter by post, registered, although the post-office was over four times as far away as the Pikčiurna house.

Two days later Trudė saw Pikčiurna's labourer come into the yard bringing the chest.

"Pikčiurnienė sent you this chest. Help me get it off the cart," said the man.

"No, Petras, take it back," said Trudė. "I don't want that chest! Look at it! All dirty and battered! And the legs broken, too!"

"It's been lying about in the shed. You know, where the hens are. . . . Pikčiurnienė said she was making you a present of it. I thought to myself—a nice kind of present! But she told me to bring it."

"Take it back, Petras, and tell Pikčiurnienė she can put it in her best room, opposite the big mirror."

Petras laughed; he thought Trudė was joking.

"It was a really good chest once."

"Yes, it was—once."

Petras had not been gone long when Pikčiurnienė came flying in. She burst into the house and halted, arms akimbo, eyes blazing. She looked as though she might set about her sister with her fists at any moment.

Trudė laughed ironically.

"Well, Buše dear, what's brought you here in such a hurry? You're all out of breath! There was no need to hurry like that! What—you'd forgotten? Of course, that's quite natural. You've so many other things to think about."

"Why didn't you take the chest, I want to know?" cried Pikčiurnienė, with a thump of her fist on the table. "How dare you send it back?"

"Why, Buše, I'd made you a present of it. I don't take my presents back."

"I don't need any of your presents! Take it back, I tell you!"

"And I tell you, you can't have understood my letter. I don't want the chest, I want my money."

"What money? When have you ever given me any money? You bit of dirt—when are you going to leave me in peace?"

"Sister dear, you must be getting old, you're losing your memory. Who took half of my portion?"

"How do I know? Maybe Father took it. Took it and drank it. Ask him, don't ask me!"

"So that's it, is it? Buše! Buše!"

"'Buše! Buše!'" Pikčiurnienė mocked her. "Is it my fault if you haven't two *groschen* to rub together? Is it my fault if you went and married a beggar, with hardly a pair of trousers to call his own? What have you done with your dowry?"

Up to now Trudė had kept up a half-jesting tone, but now she became really angry.

"I rather think, Buše, I'm of age and can do as I like with my own money. What business is it of yours? I've never taken other people's money to make myself a big landowner, and never wanted to. Give me back my money, and our paths need never cross again."

"Where's the proof that you ever gave me any money? Where are my notes of hand? Put them down there on the table and I'll give your money at once!"

"Pikčiurnienė, you're quite shameless! Father was always thoughtless, all he could do was drink and get into debt. It was because he was thoughtless he had to sell the farm, it was because he was thoughtless he gave you fifteen hundred marks, Barbė twelve hundred and Magdė and me only eight hundred each. If he'd thought even for a moment, he'd never have taken another four hundred from me and given it to you. But you—you're not thoughtless. You know very well what you're doing, you can think and you can scheme. . . . But haven't you any conscience at all?"

Buše Pikčiurnienė smiled mockingly.

"Do you know what's written in the Holy Scriptures, Būblienė? 'To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away, even that which he hath.' So there you are! If you had anything of your own, if I could see what you wanted the money for—say, to buy a farm—well, I might give it you. But give it you for

nothing? No! What do you want it for? You're all alone, you can live like a lady without any troubles or cares, without having to toil and moil. What d'you need any more money for? For the lottery? Nay, there isn't going to be any playing the lottery. . . . Maybe you want to start acting like Barbè? She'll soon be off that farm of hers, you'll see!"

"Oh, so that's it? You've swallowed up the Šnekutises too?"

"If I want to swallow them, down they go, and I shan't ask your permission!"

"Yes—you know how to get people in your web. If you've even got Barbè, what can I expect?"

"Don't expect anything out of me! I give nothing to spongers! If you had anything of your own I'd give you something, but since you haven't—not a thing."

"Pikčiurnienė, it's my own I'm asking for, not yours."

"Go and sue me, then."

Trudė Būblienė opened the door as wide as it would go.

"Pikčiurnienė, you're a liar, a swindler and a thief! You understand me? And now get out, don't foul the air of my clean room! Phew, how it stinks!"

Būblienė opened the window as though the room actually needed airing.

"I don't go about suing people. And you're not worth my taking you to court, swindler and thief that you are. . . . Why don't you go? Want to hear some more? Out with you!"

Pikčiurnienė was petrified. It was not the first time she had heard such things, but to be called "swindler" by the gentle Trudė!

"You hussy, you bit of dirt!" she howled. "Picked a time to abuse me when there are no witnesses!"

"That's just to be going on with. It's not much, but never mind that. There'll be more to come—payment for

all your vileness. . . . Well, why don't you go? Do I have to take a broom to you?"

Whether it was the last words that took effect, or for some other reason, Pikčiurnienė at last turned to leave. As she crossed the threshold she felt for the door to slam it thunderously behind her, but even this she could not manage.

That closed Trudė's account with her sister Pikčiurnienė.

The next morning she borrowed Plutienė's cart, took the half-grown pig to market and sold it.

But there was not enough money for a cow, all the same.

14

So there was no hope of getting even depreciated money from Pikčiurnienė. And Trudė had given Plutienė almost all she had. With a sudden shock she realized that she had nothing left. She had nothing even for herself, let alone for the child to which she was preparing to give life.

The pig was sold, but there was no chance to buy a cow for Plutienė. All the money went for doctors and medicines. The goat was needed to give milk for Plutienė's children. Nearly all the hens had been eaten, and Plutienė ought to have nourishing food. But at least she did seem to be a little stronger. She could look after her meagre house-keeping and the children. And when Trudė gave birth, she could take the baby and go and live with Plutienė and help her so far as she was able. Because after all, Plutienė was still very far from well.

Yes, she's still weak, thought Trudė, looking about her own bare room. But what about me? What am I going to do?

She herself was badly in need of help now. But where could she find it? She could not ask anything of

Plutienè. The neighbours? The Raudonises for whom she worked? But they were rich farmers! You couldn't go to Raudonienè and say, "Mistress, you know how things are with me. Will you . . .?" Oh no! Not to be thought of, even! Who, then? The person closest to her, and living closest, too, was her sister Barbè. What if she went there? Trudè did not expect very much from her. But after all, she had never asked her for help before. Maybe Barbè would not have refused. But Trudè had never needed anything. On the contrary, it was she who had always helped Barbè. Look how often she had lent her money! Small sums, it was true, but if you added them all up it would come to quite a lot. Not that Trudè would ever add up old debts or ask for them to be paid. She simply felt that her sister might help her a bit in this most difficult moment of her life. Of course she would help! After all, a sister was a sister!

Trudè put on a clean apron and a white kerchief, latched the door and went to Barbè.

If only she was at home!

She was. She was sitting by the table drinking coffee and eating sweet buns bought at the market. She frowned when she saw her sister enter, and Trudè almost changed her mind. But Barbè could always put on the expression she wanted to show, and she quickly assumed a smile.

"So you've remembered me at last, sister?" she said affectionately, wiping her mouth. "It's a long time since you've been here. You've quite forgotten me. . . . No time for your sister. So taken up with that Plutienè, sitting in her pocket all the time. What does she do for you, I wonder, that you can't be away from her a moment? I was very ill again the other day, I thought I was dying. I sent Kriziukas to fetch you, but he came back and said nobody was at home. Then he went to Magdè, but he didn't find her either. . . . Well, what's to be done if all

my sisters are like that! When you need help, not one of them's there! They all forget it's war-time! And the priest said in his sermon that everyone must help soldiers' mothers. . . . I've had a letter from my son, he's still all right, God be praised. But how do I know what may happen to him tomorrow? There are terrible battles over there in that France! He writes: 'I shall never come back alive.' Oh, dear God in Heaven! You don't know how fortunate you are not to have any children!"

"But Barbè, you know how I'm left!" Trudè broke in at last, cutting short the flood of complaints.

"Why, what's wrong with you? You're strong and healthy! What have you to grumble about?"

"And you? Your husband's at home—and still you complain. Remember what I've got before me. . . . I'm going to have a baby. . . ."

"Oh well—small children bring small troubles! But what on earth were you thinking of? To have a child at your age! If you wanted children, you ought to have thought of it earlier on, not now! A child needs all sorts of things—milk, and this and that. . . . You haven't given your goat to Plutienè, have you?"

"No, I put it out to pasture, because—"

"There you are, to pasture! I'd have pasture enough for a goat like that, you could have brought it here. There's whole ditches full of willows. You could have paid me a little and your goat could have browsed all the summer. But people like you always do things upside-down! Give everything away to strangers so that there's nothing left for your own!"

"But Barbè, you know why, I—"

"What was I going to say? Yes . . . see you don't find yourself in your grave. To have a child at your age, and when you're all alone, too! I don't know who's going to help you. How'll you get a doctor when there's none in Priekulè? Will you get one from town? Have you any

idea how much that'll cost? How'll you pay for it? D'you think the village council will pay for it? Or the district? Try them! And a doctor you'll have to have. If you send for the midwife, she'll say, 'I'm not going without a doctor.' You can be sure of that. And these old women in the village—better have nothing to do with them. All they can do is hurry you into the grave. . . . Eh dear me, you don't know how I've cried over you! I was talking to Pikčiurnienė the other day, and do you know what she said? 'Serves her right! She's been living with her husband without a proper wedding, without going to church. And her child'll be a bastard. Better if it didn't live.' Maybe she's right. . . . Why couldn't you go to church and let the priest marry you? Of course it's none of my business and I say nothing. And my Jonis is the same. 'Why do folks have to poke their noses into what isn't their business?' he always says. 'They'd do better to watch their own actions.' And that's what I say, too, but you can't shut people's mouths!"

"Barbė, do for goodness' sake stop talking all this nonsense!" cried Trudė, losing patience. "I came to you as a sister, to ask you to help me, and not to listen to sermons. All this you say—I know it by heart, I've heard it from all of you, it goes in one ear and out at the other."

"And haven't you need of the people you flout? You say you need help. But what help can I give you? Have I any horses? Have I hired men I can send you? Dear God, whatever's put it into your head to come to me, when I can hardly keep on my feet myself! You know quite well I've been poorly ever since they took my son to the war! . . ."

"Barbė, all I wanted was that you or Marė should come and spend the nights with me for a week or two. So that I'm not all alone in the house. So that there's somebody to give me a drink at least if I'm ill."

"Oh, dear God in Heaven! But I've already told you—Marè!... Marè's not at home. Sometimes she comes, sometimes she doesn't. And me? I'm afraid to go. What if God punishes you and you die, and I have to see it? I'd die myself of fright! Why don't you go to Plutienè?"

"Good-bye!" said Trudè and rose to go.

"Wait a bit, wait a bit, don't be in such a hurry! Have a cup of coffee. You never come to see me..."

"I have no time, sister."

"Wait a minute—what was it I was wanting to ask you?"

Trudè closed the door behind her.

Should she go to Magdè? But Magdè Šilbakienè lived a long way off. So Trudè went back home again despondently.

There she found Staigienè.

No, Trudè had not forgotten the Staigises. But when you have near relations, you're ashamed to go to strangers for help. Staigienè might start talk going about her sisters, and Trudè did not want to have people speaking ill of them. Better for nobody to know how Barbè had shown herself up today. Of course it was no use trying to hide what Buše was like, she was too well known. But people probably still thought Barbè a decent, kind-hearted woman. Let them go on thinking it.

"Trudè! Dear! I've been waiting ages for you! Can't you come and stay with me a bit? Mother's very ill. And you've got a good hand with sick people. If you could stop with her when we're out in the fields?" Staigienè spoke with such warm sincerity and looked her in the eyes with such real affection that Trudè could not possibly suspect that she was hiding anything, or had come for any other reason.

It turned out, however, that Mother Staigienè was not so weak as all that. She could get about, do odd jobs, and clean up the room which Staigis had just white-

washed. When she saw Trudè, she took both her hands, glanced down, then smiled with maternal affection.

"Let's live quietly and comfortably a week or two—until a third comes to keep us awake!"

Before Trudè had time to look round, Staigienè had put up white curtains at the window, spread fresh soft straw for a mattress, taken the last clean pillow-case saved for emergencies out of her chest, and made up the bed. On the floor she put a runner—not new, but freshly washed, and a vase of carnations on the table.

"Well, here we are, all grand for the visitor," she joked.

Trudè burst into tears. She was not accustomed to kindness. Only Jurgis had been kind to her, but he was far away. She could not even tell him that soon—soon—

Suddenly she felt bad. She said nothing, but Staigienè saw for herself, and hurried to finish tidying up.

One after the other, all her sister's unfeeling, ominous words came back to her. The end. Trudè did not want to die. But it was not only the fear of death that weighed her down—she could not forget the taunt cast at her that all these years she had been clever enough to keep clear. If anybody else had told her what her sister Barbè was like, what a dirty mind she had, Trudè would never have believed it!

Staigienè thought Trudè was afraid of the pain, and tried to comfort her as best she could. Afraid? What was there to be afraid of? How old was she? Well, then! Nothing to worry about!

"My sister Usnienè was forty-six when she had a son. And everything went off quite all right! The baby was as strong as could be and the mother was fine! And now she's got a grand boy growing up. . . . That's the way we all started, first we tortured our mothers and then we made them happy. . . . My mother was glad when she had me, and yours when she had you, although some-

times they had to slap us, you can't get along without that either...."

Trudė smiled, and Staigienė felt easier.

"Everything's going to be all right! You'll see!"

"I've got a little money put by for the midwife," said Trudė. "But if a doctor's needed—"

"I told you not to worry!"

Staigienė saw Trudė into bed, then climbed up to the attic for a cradle; this too she decorated to the best of her powers.

When the pains began, Staigis went for the midwife. She turned out to be a very decent, sensible woman. She managed without any doctor, waited for a little while to see that all was normal, and left only when she saw that the mother was in good hands and in no danger, and the son healthy and sleeping soundly.

"Didn't I tell you everything would be all right?" Staigienė triumphed. "Well, children, come in and look at the new baby," she went on, turning towards the door where her own children were peeping in. "No, don't kiss him, don't kiss him! You can just stroke his head.... That's the way! And for a treat—here's something for each of you! Now, run out and mind the geese!"

She distributed pieces of sugar and hunks of bun, and shooed them all out of the room.

"Well, and what would you like, Mother?"

Yes, Trudė Būblienė was a mother! She had not only given birth, she herself had been born afresh, she had become a different person with new emotions which she had never felt or even dreamed of before. For an instant her thoughts turned to her sisters—to Pikčiurnienė and Šnekutienė; they too were mothers, they too ought to have been born afresh!...

No—she wanted nothing but rest. She was so indescribably happy! She wanted to listen to the breathing of her strong sturdy son. From the corner of her eye the mother

saw the tiny fist that had escaped from the coverings. She had not had a really good look at his little face yet. But never mind, she would be able to look her fill. . . . Something rose in Trudè's throat.

"Etmikè, come here. . . ."

"You want to whisper something?"

But Trudè had nothing to whisper. She put her arms round Staigienè and hugged her.

"You mustn't make quick movements! You need a scolding!"

Staigienè kissed Trudè and went out quickly to hide her own tears.

All the gossips in Benagiai had their heads together. Trudè Būbliënè had a baby—just think of that, now! But the baby wasn't the main thing—after all, she had a lawful husband, you couldn't deny it! The question was—would she have it christened?

No, Būbliënè's child was not christened.

It was something unheard-of in Benagiai! In a village where you had to pass the church whatever road you took, such a God-fearing village with such a pious congregation—and now a thing like that! Of course it was true, people remembered, once upon a time in Benagiai—no, it was in Traiškiai—some farm-hand or day-labourer, he'd gone away long ago, thank God, some fellow like that had refused to christen a baby. But it didn't matter because when he wasn't at home his wife had slipped out secretly to the church and got the child christened just the same. But there was Trudè, able to do as she liked—for her husband was away at the front—Trudè herself wanting to bring her child up a heathen! And where? In Benagiai! That was a bit too much, something had to be done!

So something was done.

The first thing was that when Trudè went to the district office to register the child, the official, who knew the answer he would get, asked gravely, "And when are you going to christen Viktoras?"

Trudè guessed that he was trying to draw her into an argument, which was just the thing she wanted to avoid. Why quarrel? What good would that do? She would never convince the man or make him look at things more sensibly.

"We'll have to see," she answered evasively.

The official laughed nastily.

"I rather think you can't christen him even if you want to. You weren't married in church, you only registered here, isn't that right?"

Trudè had not even known which children could be christened and which couldn't. But now she knew. Good!

"Then do you consider, sir," she said, "that your registration is less valid than that of the church?"

"No, no! I only wanted to say—"

A little later the pastor called on Trudè. The pastor himself, now what do you think of that!

Again came the same question.

Trudè had her answer ready.

"But how can you christen my child when we were not married in church?"

Yes, that was true, such children were not usually christened. But nevertheless the pastor would be compassionate. He was not one of those who closed the doors of the church against sinners. He would never do that. Was not one lost sheep dearer to Jesus Christ than ninety-nine of the righteous?

"But then why does the state authorize civil marriages if they make people criminals?" Trudè wanted to know.

Aha, so that was her talk, was it? But the pastor was not one to be caught.

"If life could be lived without religion, all the churches

would have been closed long ago! There are some today who would like to destroy the Holy Church. Like your husband! But the church stands and it will continue to stand, because people need it."

"Very good, Your Reverence, let it stand. I leave the church alone, let it leave me alone."

"I came to you in answer to the urgent plea of your sister."

"A-ah! Which sister?"

"How can you ask! Who is the wisest of them all? Mrs. Pikčiurnienė came to me in tears...."

"She needn't cry over me and my child. Let her keep her tears for herself, for her vileness, her disgusting greed, her—"

"Do not dare to slander your sister! She is a faithful daughter of the church. Do you know how much she gives to the church, how much she gives for the poor? No! You know nothing!"

"Soap bubbles look very pretty until you get close, Your Reverence! And do you know how many poor people she abuses and swindles, right here in Benagai? No! Of that *you* know nothing! Don't worry, she squeezes a hundred times more out of the poor than she ever gives you back for them."

"Slander! Lies and slander! She told me herself—she wept over the lost sheep. Think—think well and ponder. What are you doing? About the sins of your husband I say nothing. He is at the front, he is defending the fatherland—unless he's deserted, of course.... But the faithful will be outraged, they will turn their faces from you. Each one will say in the words of the psalmist, 'I will not consort with the ungodly!' You, the daughter of such God-fearing parents, how can you—?"

"Excuse me, please, Your Reverence, the baby's crying."

"Trudė Būblienė! Your sin calls to Heaven for retri-

bution! You will answer before God's judgement-seat for the perdition of your child!"

"Heaven's judgement will not be as harsh as yours."

She soon came to feel all that had been promised her. She was denounced from the pulpit as an apostate. All true Christians should know what a blind unbeliever lived among them.

"Pray for her, my children! Kneel and pray to the Almighty that He may not destroy us with fire and brimstone like Sodom and Gomorrah!"

Among the congregation in church that day there was not only Buše Pikčiurnienė, but Barbė Šnekutienė, rejoicing to be rid at last of their unbelieving sister. And Barbė saw with her own eyes how Buše wept. At least, Buše never once removed her handkerchief from her eyes. Kneeling, she swayed back and forward. She let all see how she mourned the lost soul of her sister, how she prayed for her sister's repentance, how she pleaded with God not to bring down fire and brimstone on Benagai.

After the service she stood by the church door and gave her hand to all who wished to express their sympathy.

But for some reason, whether people were dense or just didn't understand how they ought to behave—there seemed to be very few of these sympathizers. So Buše Pikčiurnienė, thoroughly offended—Barbė watched it all—climbed into her carriage and rolled home without even waiting to take leave of the pastor.

15

"Revolution in Russia?" gasped Pikčiurnienė, astonished. "Why, have they gone crazy, or what?"

She comforted herself, however, with the thought that Russia was not at her door, it was far away to the east. . . . But make peace with Russia? What for? Why

didn't the Kaiser go and thrash those revolutionaries? Oh, he needed to free his hands for fighting in the West, did he? Aha! The war wasn't ending yet, then? No? No! And afterwards there'd be those Reds to fight!

But they could never let people alone to live quietly! There was nothing in the papers about peace, but all the same talk started going round that the war was ending. And before Pikčiurnienė had time to collect her thoughts it actually did end. And brought unexpected results. Jurgis did not return, and Kaiser Wilhelm fled to Holland! Then someone set the rumour going that "the tassel of the German Michel's nightcap," in other words the narrow strip of land north of the Niemen, was to be taken away from Germany. Whom it would belong to, nobody knew yet. But there were some who called themselves Lithuanians (the Pikčiurnas, like others round about Klaipėda, called themselves Lithovenians) going about saying this Niemen District ought to be joined to Lithuania. Terrible! In Lithuania they were all *žemaitises**—beggars, one and all!

Of course, it's the old tale of birds of a feather, she thought. Who wants it? Who's running to embrace those *žemaitises*? Men like Kojelis, Staigis, Malonė!... Does that Malonė think the *žemaitises* will give him money to put up fences? You'll wait long enough before you see it, my man, long enough! They've no fences themselves. Just think—joined to Lithuania! I don't need any Lithuania to be a Lithovenian! We've done without them up to now, and we can go on the same way. But maybe there's something else behind all this? That Staigis, now, sometimes he lets out things I don't quite understand. Dear God, why is Thy hand so heavy upon us?...

* *Žemaitė* (or *Zmud*) was the name of a Lithuanian tribe of the old days that lived in great poverty along the lower reaches of the Niemen. In bourgeois Lithuania the word *žemaitė* was used in contempt for the poor—for workers and farm-labourers.—*Tr.*

Pikčiurnienė wept. It was not quite clear why she wept—for her dead son, or the fall of Wilhelm, or because the war had ended so soon. Probably all three.

It wasn't so good that the Social-Democrats had got power in Germany, but still, that could be borne. But the papers said there was real hard fighting against some Spartakists, whatever they might be, who were trying to get power themselves. And those were said to be even worse than the Social-Democrats. They wanted to take everything away from the wealthy—the factories, the land, the fields—and divide it all up among the workers and farm-hands. Pikčiurnienė's heart sank within her, and she prayed more fervently than ever.

"Lord God, Father in Heaven," she whispered. "How canst Thou allow those godless Spartakists to get power over us, Thy humble servants? We are Thy children, Thy faithful followers! Have compassion on us, reduce to dust them that revile Thee, those accursed Spartakists who want to rob us! Amen!"

Evidently Pikčiurnienė's prayers were heard, for soon the papers brought the news that the most terrible, the most dangerous leaders of the Spartakists—Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg—had been killed. The Lord be praised!

But the Niemen District was separated from Germany all the same. People said that for the time being it would be administered by the French, or the British, or maybe even the Americans.

"Well, let come what may! Perhaps things won't get any worse," sighed Pikčiurnienė. Her heart was already a little lighter.

But after all, a human being is not just a dumb animal. A human being thinks, worries. A human being needs daily bread, yes, but something more too.

The French? They always made Pikčiurnienė think of frogs, somehow. Folks said the French ate frogs. This

gave her a squeamish distaste for them. Just like those workers from town who licked their chops over a bit of horse meat! Ugh!... But wait a bit, what was it Pikčiurna had read in the papers? (That good-for-nothing old man did nothing but read the papers; if he'd taken up some holy book, now, or something about farming!) Pikčiurna had read that Klaipeda would make a good port for foreign ships. Well, why not?

"But whose ships?"

"They say it's being done so those revolutionary cut-throats shouldn't be able to use the port. The papers say the *žemaitises* are taking pattern from the Russian Bolsheviks. They've got their 'Soviets,' their councils all over Lithuania! And maybe, Heaven forbid, they'll come along here and start their—their—what's it they call it?"

"You don't even know how to talk properly! Their devil's work, of course. To stir up the workers and farm-labourers against us. Isn't that it?"

"Yes.... It wasn't put quite like that, but anything can happen."

"Yes, yes, I understand! So now British ships are going to come to Klaipeda, or even better, American ships. That's not so bad. They'll most likely have guns, they'll put them all along the coast and give those *žemaitises* what for, and those Bolsheviks too! M'yes. So everything's going to be safe and orderly! When you're safe, food tastes better! And you'll see, we shan't be having to give up our rye and wheat for bits of paper; we'll get real gold! You understand that, Jokūbas? Gold! Ah, merciful God, how well you have heeded my prayers!"

Buše Pikčiurnienė at once forgot all about Frenchmen and frogs. She felt herself safe in Jesus' bosom. She revelled in the thought of how she would sell wheat, rye, barley and pork.

Meanwhile, in the towns the hunger was getting worse. The townspeople, and particularly the workers,

were near starvation point. And Pikčiurnienė flourished mightily.

New furniture appeared in the house—a third sofa and three arm-chairs, two new carpets, a walnut bedroom suite for her son, an oak wardrobe with a bevelled mirror and an oak writing-table. Pikčiurnienė could not have said who would sit and write at it, but it was pleasant to have it. Silk curtains hung at the windows, silk coverlets adorned the beds. (Who wanted homespun? Old-fashioned stuff!) There were tapestry table-cloths—so beautiful that it was a shame to take them off to lay the table for guests. She did, however, take them off, for she also had white and coloured linen cloths. Silver liqueur glasses gleamed in the special cupboard for crystal, bought during the war. She did not quite know the use of these. But how pleasant it was when Barbė asked, “Oh, Buše dear, what’s that shining in there? What do you do with those things?”

After all, there was no need for any exact answer. You could just give a superior smile and say nothing.

When the French came and occupied the district, money began pouring in on Pikčiurnienė—first in hundreds, then in thousands.

But the number of beggars increased too. Some people would give them a few potatoes or a crust of bread for nothing, but most preferred the kind of “beggars” who brought something to barter.

Those who came with empty hands were never let in by Pikčiurnienė.

“After all, I can’t feed all the beggars in the world, anyway,” she said with a shrug. “If a person has something to exchange, that’s another matter!”

One day a war invalid came. With tears in his eyes he asked for something to eat.

“What will you give me for it?” asked Pikčiurnienė indifferently, certain that the man had nothing.

"I—I'll pay you!" he stammered and began fumbling in his pocket.

"I don't want your wretched money! I've enough of my own! Go to those that need it!"

"If you're so rich, then take pity on a starving man!"

"'Sta-a-arving!' " Pikčiurnienė mimicked him. "You're all starving. If I took pity on you all, I'd soon be starving myself. Haven't you anything you can exchange?"

The man thought a while, then took off his jacket.

"What will you give me for this?"

"It isn't worth anything."

"It's my best and only jacket, madam."

"Keep it, then!"

"But my children are hungry!"

"Why should I have to worry about your children? Oh well, maybe those rags of yours would do for one of the farm-hands. Shall I give you some bread?" she said compassionately. After all, you had to be sorry for the poor fellow.

The man went away in his shirt, sniffing and wiping his eyes, a loaf of bread dangling in the sack slung over his despondently bent back.

Another time it was a man in civilian clothes. Before he had time to open his mouth, Pikčiurnienė asked, "What have you to barter?"

"Madam, take pity on me! I have nothing at all. If you don't ask too high a price—"

Pikčiurnienė looked him up and down.

"Where did you get that new fur cap? You can't buy a cap like that nowadays. . . . And your top-boots? I'd even give you lard for those boots."

The man took off the boots, placed the cap on top of them, and left, holding in one hand all that she had given.

One day a woman came from the town. Pikčiurnienė was just having breakfast.

"Heavens above, there's no end to them!" she groaned, biting off a piece of bun. "When are they going to stop this begging? They've got used to coming around. An easy way of making a living!"

"Have pity, mistress! People don't go begging if they can help it," said the woman.

"What can I give you? Jokūbēlis!" she cried suddenly. "Where are your eyes? Look, look at Pluta's geese!"

"But they're not on our field," Jokūbēlis objected.

"They will be, if you dawdle! Go quick, you can finish eating afterwards! I'll cover up the meat to keep it warm. . . . All you want is to get out of doing anything. Bone lazy, you are!"

"Mistress, I'm not an ordinary beggar," the woman from town started again. "But I've lost everything in the war. Have pity on me! God will reward you. My children are hungry, they're ill with hunger."

"God Himself turns His face from idlers."

Pikčiurnienė was watching the geese. She saw one of the Pluta children come running out after them to stop them getting on to the Pikčiurna fields.

"Jokūbēlis, hurry, hurry!" Buše called. "Drive the geese here into the yard! Quick! Quick! Can't you see he's getting them back? Aha! Good, splendid!"

Now she had time to turn round to the woman and examine her from head to foot. A skirt all patches, a gingham blouse, the kind worn only by the poor since the war, bare head, bare feet. No, there was nothing to take from this one.

"Why don't any of you ask me for work? You want me to give you something? All right, but first go and do some work in the shed out there. The fields are being manured, and I haven't enough hands. . . . Brought them in, Jokūbēlis? Good lad! Now come and finish your breakfast. I'll show those good-for-nothings!"

"I don't want any more. . . . Merčius Pluta is crying, he says why did I drive the geese away!"

"Well, you might have eaten some more. What'll I do with this meat now?"

Pikčiurnienė started clearing the table and the woman sank down on the ground by the door; the smell of fat, eggs and coffee made her head swim. She had never begged before, she could not bring herself to say that she had eaten nothing for three days, that she desperately needed something, even if it was only a crust of dry bread.

"Well, go and work till dinner-time. Then I'll feed you," Pikčiurnienė encouraged her. She finished clearing the table and went.

The woman went into the shed and worked until she collapsed.

"That's always the way! Only brought down trouble on myself again. Heavens above, why am I always plagued? Get that woman out of here! Adomas, take the cart, harness up and drive her to the station!"

"The station? Can't you see what's the matter with her?"

"What is the matter, then?"

"She'd got a flow of blood," said one of the serving-girls.

"What business is that of mine? I'm not a midwife, am I? Get her away, I tell you, look sharp, get her out of my yard!"

"Give her something, at least! After all, she worked as long as she could. She was simply worn out."

"Heavens above, have you all gone clean crazy? She can thank me for driving her to the station. What other mistress would do that?"

The day-labourers and farm-hands who had gathered round collected a little money for the unfortunate woman. They hoped to shame their mistress. But Pikčiurnienė

remarked indifferently that those who had too much could scatter it right and left if they liked, but as for her, she had nothing to spare.

A shepherd boy took the woman to the doctor. All the money they had collected barely sufficed to pay him and to get medicine.

"And she didn't give me even a crust of bread, not even a crust!" the sick woman wept.

16

Trudė Būblienė too watched the papers, read them even more carefully than the Pikčiurnas.

She was so stirred by the Revolution that she could hardly sleep. She drank in every piece of news from Russia. Because that was what must be happening in Germany too! She never missed a single item from the collapsing German front. The events in Berlin—Jurgis wrote from there, but once only—affected her so strongly that whenever she thought of them her heart beat fast, her eyes sparkled with hope and she glowed all over.

Every evening she told her boy that his father was a hero, his father was fighting bad men who wanted war, who wanted to make poor people like them go and kill each other because war helped the rich to get a lot more money and all sorts of good things.

"Like Pikčiurnienė?" asked little Viktoras.

Trudė had never said anything to her boy about Pikčiurnienė. How did he know of her?

"Who's been talking to you about Pikčiurnienė?"

"I saw her scolding Plutienė, Mum. And Anelė told me she's bad like that because she's so very, very rich."

"Don't let's talk about Pikčiurnienė, dear."

"But why not?"

Yes, there it was—why not? A difficult question to answer. And after all—why not?

"Better talk about our Daddy. When he comes home he'll bring us a big, big bundle full of all sorts of good things!"

"As big as this?" The boy spread out his arms as wide as they would go.

"Bigger! So big that nobody can hold it!"

The boy could not imagine so many good things all at once, so he wisely did not bother his head about it. But he did want to know what his Daddy looked like.

"Has he got a beard?"

The mother was half asleep, but the son went on thinking about his father, who would not have a beard, of course—he did not like beards—but would be very big and very jolly. And the bundle of good things would be a little bit open so that you could break off a piece of something nice. And then lots and lots of sweets would come rolling out. Viktoriukas ate them all night....

Trudė was pleased to hear about the capitulation of Germany and the flight of Wilhelm II to Holland, but not particularly excited. She felt no special interest, either, in all the talk about the Niemen District being separated from Germany; Jurgis had told her that if there was a revolution, frontiers would not stop it.

Nevertheless, her spirits were high, and she waited hopefully for further developments.

Then the papers which had been full of such great happenings gradually changed their tone. There were still some interesting reports here and there, although they were not very reliable, but on the whole the columns were filled mainly with local news.

The Benagai men had come back from the army long ago. The first to return were the sons of the rich farm-

ers—Benagys, Meikis and others of the same kind. They all abused the Revolution. They said the Russian Revolution was to blame for everything. The sailors were supposed to have started it all over there, and then the sailors in Germany had been infected and they began rebelling too. And that was how all the trouble began. What had they to grumble at, those sailors? Nothing to do but sit and guzzle, pick their teeth, play games and run after women. Was that so bad, now? What, actually, had they ever done? The Battle of Jutland?... Well, all right. But what else? The submarine war? But there'd been no revolution on the submarines. If they'd only stuck it out a little longer, if there'd been just one more really good offensive, Germany would most certainly have won the war.

Then we'd have gone on living in the old way, they said. Or even better. We Germans would have ruled the whole world! But now?...

Now there were some of the labourers back from the army going about, saying they wouldn't work on the old conditions. Getting independent. Had their conferences and their councils, decided that over there in Berlin some were going too slowly and others too fast, but anyway, all the rich men were soon to turn up their toes because they didn't know how to work themselves and now after the war they wouldn't be able to find a single worker. Well, and then—

But the rich men found workers. And the others soon saw nobody was going to feed them. The Revolution was ending, and—alas!—not in favour of the workers. There had been too many who certainly wanted a change, but had no desire to help in any revolution themselves. "Let the others look after it, we've had enough of fighting!" So the result was bitter disappointment.

There was nothing left but to go knocking at the rich men's doors again.

Pluta, too, had come home long ago.

He was little changed. Depressed, careworn, with a gaunt, lined face—that was Pluta when he left, and that was Pluta when he returned. He felt no particular grief that Germany had lost the war, and no particular joy over the changes that had taken place. He expected nothing from them so far as he was concerned. In fact he hardly thought about them at all. All these matters were too high for him, too far away and too hard to understand. And another reason why Pluta could not go very deeply into things was that he was crushed by his own troubles. And then, too, perhaps nobody explained it to him properly.

He found Trudė Būblienė in charge of his house. She worked hard on his poor farm, looked after his children who in their turn looked after little Viktoriukas, economized and saved, added her own mite to what she could make from the farm, and took it all to the hospital in town where Plutienė had been lying seriously ill for many months.

Still Būblys did not come

Evidently there were still important happenings of some sort in Berlin and various other cities. That must be why Jurgis Būblys was delayed. But what they could be was more than Trudė could imagine. Perhaps, though, he was in prison? Or dead? But Trudė would not even think of that.

One day she could no longer keep her thoughts within her, and asked Pluta why, when there was revolution everywhere else, things were so quiet here. What did he think? Of course it wasn't absolutely quiet, people talked and cursed and threatened, but that was all.

"What?" gasped Pluta, as though suddenly startled out of sleep. "D'you want them to start fighting here too? You want revolution?"

"Perhaps I do, Martynas! Why has the job been only

half done? When you sow rye, you harrow it too so that the crows and sparrows won't peck up the seed, don't you? It's the same here."

But figures of speech were too much for Pluta, he held stubbornly to one idea.

"I don't know what good that revolution can do us. The gentry have always been over us, and they always will be."

"But why do we have to have gentry at all?"

"The hospital's wanting money again," Pluta answered just as though he had not heard Trudė's last words. "When I was there, they were after me right at once: 'If you don't pay up, you can take the patient home.' But how can I take her when she can't even move or talk? God, where can I find money?"

Trudė did not know where to find money either. She had none, she had had none for a long time, and there was nothing more she could sell.

"Perhaps we'll manage to think of something, Martynas. If only Jurgis were here," she groaned, then caught herself up. No, she would not let herself start groaning. She knew this was the most difficult time, but she believed that other, better days would come. So she would wait and hope, and not let herself groan. But how was she to help Pluta?

"There's nothing we can think of," Pluta answered, then rose, took his cap and turned to the door.

"Where are you going, Martynas?" asked Trudė in alarm.

"To try my luck."

"Don't go to the Pikčiurnas, Martynas! Don't go! Maybe it might be worth while trying the Staigises again?"

"Eh, Staigis is just as poor as we are!" With a hopeless gesture Pluta turned and stumped across the fields to the Pikčiurnas.

And still there was no sign of Jurgis Būblys.

The papers said that the Klaipėda District really was being separated from Germany, it was to be occupied by the French and governed by some sort of prefect.

Suddenly—in one night, it seemed—the whole district was full of French and other soldiers armed to the teeth, so many soldiers and so many guns, you almost expected the ground to give way under the weight of them! They did not stop in the town, either, but went deeper into the country, towards the places where there was fighting, where people did not want to submit to the gentry.

"Those politicians just kick us around like a ball," said Staigis bitterly when he saw Trudė. "As if we hadn't been through enough, as if we didn't suffer enough from the war!"

"How's it all going to end?"

"I wonder. People have a lot of patience, Trudė. But it's not eternal. I was in town yesterday, I went to take a look at the docks. You should see the way they're rushing to load the ships! It's an eye-opener! I looked at what was going on on board and I thought—how rich our district must be if all that can be squeezed out of it. It seems we have to pay reparations to the Entente—as though we were to blame for that damned war! But what's the use of talking? Take what comes and make the best of it. Mr. Stepulaitis who's over us now—the chairman of the directorium—he spends all day with the prefect practising his French, and the officials are turning themselves inside out to collect all the cattle and pigs and wheat and all sorts of other things. The ships are waiting, they've got to be loaded quick!"

"But what were the people saying?"

Staigis shrugged his shoulders and snorted angrily.

"The people stand there, gaunt, hungry, and watch those fat beasts taking away the last grain. But what can they do with guns pointed at their heads? Jump into

the water? Our Steputaitis and that French General Audris would be only too pleased—less bother! People trail about the streets like shadows. All who can are getting out of the town. Yesterday I saw a long queue at a shop waiting for bread to come in. Whether they got any I don't know, but I do know that two women fell down and didn't get up, I saw that myself. Those two won't need any more bread."

Then one day Jurgis Būblys came back.

He came on foot, and as he crossed the cemetery he saw a small group of people, an open grave, a coffin, the grey-headed pastor, Pluta and—Trudė. She had a wreath of fir branches in her hand. Pluta's children were clustered round her, holding on to her skirt, pale and frightened. But no—there was one who did not look like the others. He was younger. Flaxen curls fluttered in the wind, and his eyes were clear and bright—like Trudė's! A wave of warmth swept through Jurgis. He came closer and heard the pastor saying that those whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth. Jurgis saw Pluta weeping. He saw the poor coffin of undressed pine lowered into the grave. He saw a few men fill it in and erect a cross, and saw Trudė lay the only wreath on it.

But when Trudė rose, she felt somebody touch her elbow. At first she thought it was Viktoriukas; but no—there must have been something different about this touch, for her heart suddenly stopped, leaped into her throat, and then beat wildly. Trudė turned slowly and their eyes met.

That was all.

Trudė gently drew her elbow away and fell on her knees by the grave, covering her face with her hands. Was she weeping? No. She needed just a moment for herself, just a moment for her thoughts....

"But Jurgis, you said everything would be different after the war."

"But isn't it?" he asked with an uncertain smile.

"It's different, yes. But—but when will it be better?"

"It will be, some day. Be sure of that."

They walked silently home from the cemetery, very close together.

17

That evening Jurgis Būblys paced up and down their room without striking anything with his elbows, as he sometimes had before the war. And every time he unconsciously counted—four paces long, four paces wide. In those years of war when every corner in Buše Pikčiurnienė's "palace," as people mockingly called her new house, was crammed with wealth, Trudė Būbliienė's only room had been stripped of all but bare necessities.

She prepared the meagre supper. But no, it was not meagre! There might be only a few potatoes and a hunk of black bread, but Jurgis was there. They were sitting down three to table. They had never been three before.

For the first time in all those long years Trudė's home felt warm and cosy. She found a table-cloth in the cupboard—not new, but clean, and put clean white sheets on the bed. For a moment the sun broke through the clouds and sent a rosy beam through the straggly pines outside the window. The poor room was filled with light, with new life. Jurgis had come home! It mattered nothing that his boots were worn, his trousers frayed and ragged, his jacket stained, the buttons all missing and the sleeves out at elbows. Jurgis would throw off those rags, there were still some of his old clothes left. The great thing was that he had come home, and come home safe and sound, with arms and legs whole. And Trudė felt that it was not chance that had preserved him—destiny had

preserved him for great purposes, for fresh struggles. She gazed and gazed at him, she felt she could never gaze her fill. He was so tall and slender and broad-shouldered, so handsome and so good! But there was some silver in his dark hair.

"Jurgis, you've started going grey!" cried Trudė, but added quickly—evidently fearing he might be hurt, "It suits you!"

Jurgis laughed.

"And what about you? Come on, let's see!"

"Let me alone! I've no time to be looking in the mirror to see how much of my youth's left—and no mirror either, only a broken bit."

Jurgis put his arms round his wife, pressed her to him, kissed her on the head and saw several white hairs.

"You know—when I was at the front I always imagined you getting grey and wrinkled and bent. You were always working and worrying. . . . And always about other people, always helping the ones in trouble! But today when I saw you there at the cemetery, you looked just the same as the first time I saw you. You remember?"

"You're laughing at me! Do you know how old I was then? Buše scolded me, said the milk wasn't dry on my lips yet!"

"We'll always be young, my dear one. We mustn't let ourselves get old, we've got a lot to do yet."

Trudė blushed and hid her face on Jurgis' shoulder. She herself felt that she was still young. Otherwise she would not have waited and longed for him like a girl for her sweetheart.

For the first time in all those years she could sit and let her hands lie idle, she could rest and be happy. She had never rejoiced over the much-played-up victories of the war. When the church-bells rang to announce the capture of another fortress (and in the first year of the war they had often rung, for the Germans were still advanc-

ing), Trudė had only sighed and thought of those who had been killed in the battle, and of the women who would long mourn their dear ones. And when the church-bells stopped proclaiming "great victories," when instead of ringing they tolled and tolled as though they could not stop—for many died from terrible epidemics, typhus and that Spanish influenza that came from somewhere—then Trudė never had a free moment. She could not sit idle, she was always to be found wherever help was needed. And it was needed by many.

Yes, that evening Trudė Būblienė was happy. Jurgis had come home! True, this was not exactly the way she had pictured his return. It was to have put an end to all troubles. That was what she had dreamed of, particularly in the last year when all the other men came home and only Jurgis was still away. He was as dear to her as ever—no, even dearer—because he had risen against those who oppressed the working man. She had never talked to anybody of her love or longing when he was away, and she did not want to say anything of it now. He should understand it all for himself. And he did.

"Jurgis, you haven't told me anything about it all."

"What's there to tell?"

"Tell us, Daddy, I want to hear too—what's war like?" Viktoriukas begged. He was sitting in his little chair quieter and more serious than he had ever been before.

Jurgis Būblys rose and began pacing up and down the room, stopping now and then to stare at the walls—or rather, at the newspapers pasted on them, as though he wanted to absorb in one moment all the lies that had been printed over so many years. In former times, too, he had had the habit of pacing up and down the room, frowning, his whole mind concentrated on the answer to some question that gave him no peace. But now he already knew much. Now his eyes were wide open, they saw clearly. They could see not only the dark, gloomy, burdensome

past, not only the confused, unclear present, but a future that promised much. He could also see that a broad field of struggle separated that future from the present. Many would take part in that struggle, and many would go under. But Būblys knew without a shadow of doubt whose would be the ultimate victory.

"Jurgis, talk, say something—anything!"

"But is it so bad to be quiet and think?"

"Remember how many years it is since I've heard your voice. I was always with other people, but there was nobody I could really talk to—people couldn't think of anything but their own troubles. They had so many of them."

Before Būblys could answer there was a knock at the door. Men began dropping in one after the other. Staigis came, and Pikčiurna's men, Krizas and Adomas, and the labourer Valaitis.

If anybody had asked them what reason they had for coming, they would have said, "Nothing special . . . just looked in."

But nobody asked. It was clear without words why they came by tacit agreement to Būblys' house. Trudė gave up the last chair to the guests and sat down on the edge of the bed, taking the boy on her knee.

For some time Būblys said little. He only gave each fresh arrival a strong hand-clasp and a word of greeting. He continued his pacing, stopping for a moment before one or another of the visitors, or by the window drumming on the pane.

Night was falling. The setting sun had sent in a parting smile and now the sky was gloomy again. The rain would stop for a little while, only to pour down faster than ever. The wind drove the drops hard against the window and howled in the chimney. The old, rusty alarm-clock ticked off minutes and hours. Sometimes it seemed to be at its last gasp, the ticking became uneven, halting,

like the footsteps of a wary man; but then it would gather up fresh strength and tramp on.

Nobody started any real conversation. Staigis lighted his pipe. Trudè quietly asked about his wife's health. They whispered, shaking their heads. Then silence fell again.

Finally Jurgis Būblys said, "Well, comrades—"

He sat down for a moment on the edge of the bed beside his wife, took her hand and stroked it. That hand had done so much hard toil that the skin was rough and the fingers would not straighten. But the more Trudè had worked, the poorer she had become. And those who did no work at all got rich, thought Būblys.

Again he turned to the guests.

"Well, comrades, so we've come together again at last. . . . How've you been going on, these years? Where's your Iron Cross, Adomas?"

"The same place as yours, Jurgis."

"I never got one," laughed Būblys. "I wasn't much of a soldier."

"I did," said Adomas sombrely. "But believe me, Jurgis, I threw it away long ago. What did they pin an Iron Cross on me for? Because I killed so many people. What I ought to have done was hold out a hand to them and say, 'Why should we kill each other? Let's go and kill the ones who've sent us into this hell!' But we didn't do it."

Adomas jumped up. It was as though he could not sit still, he wanted to pace the room. But the room was not big enough for two to pace, so he and Būblys stopped, face to face. Both were tall and erect, but Būblys' eyes were filled with vitality and decision, while those of Adomas were screened by dark glasses that concealed any expression.

"I threw my gun away, Jurgis, in the Argonne Forest. There was a gas attack. When I came to I knew I was in a dark forest, but where I was or what had happened I could not remember."

Adomas fell silent again. Reflections from the lamp played on his glasses. After a moment or two, he continued:

"But all the same, I feel sort of guilty. Maybe I ought to have done differently. But I didn't know how. We did know, all of us, what was happening in the East, over there in Russia. But we had nobody to start things. Only those that could talk and dream. . . . And then when I came out of hospital, it was all over. The Social-Democrats and the rich men, the factory owners, had settled down and turned things the way they wanted. Nearly everywhere the arms had been struck out of the hands of the Spartakists. So what was there left for me to do?"

At that moment the door quietly opened again and Pluta entered. He nodded silently in greeting and then remained standing in the middle of the room, not sure what to do next.

"Come over here, neighbour, sit down!" said Trudé, indicating a seat. "Are the children alone in the house? Won't they be frightened?"

"My sister and her husband are there, they haven't left yet. We talked a bit, then they went to bed, they've got to be off early tomorrow. But I couldn't get to sleep, somehow, so I thought I'd just drop in here a while."

"Quite right, Martynas."

Büblys had been looking at him thoughtfully, and now he spoke—quietly, musingly, half to himself, half to the company.

"So here we are, we've come to the really important question—what to do? What to do so that they shouldn't crush us all down the same way they've done with our Pluta."

A storm of feeling rose in Pluta at these words. His hands trembled, a hoarse, choked gurgle rose in his throat but he could not articulate a word. Trudé felt sorry for him. She, better than any other, knew his grief and his

utter inability to stand up for himself. She took him by the elbow and stroked his arm to let him feel her friendly concern.

"Jurgis, why say that now? He's only just buried his wife. It's bad enough for him as it is. Why make him feel worse?"

"Just because it is so bad, Trudė," Būblys answered. "All that's happened to him could happen to any one of us. The important thing is that both he and all the rest of us should understand why it happens and who's to blame for it."

"I only know one thing," said Pluta. "When I was at the front I prayed to God all the time to let me come back alive to my family and take up my yoke again."

"And so God heard your prayer?" said Krizas Rauslys, one of Pikčiurnienė's men. There was a glint of mockery in his eyes, but Pluta saw nothing of it.

"Yes, of course," he said simply. "I was never even wounded, and I was in terrible battles. That was because I had to come back to my wife and children. And I did come back. . . . Though my wife's gone now. But that was God's will. What have I left but my faith in God?"

"You ought to say—in God and Pikčiurnienė—isn't that more like it?" said Adomas ironically. But Pluta still did not catch the mockery.

"Whatever she may be like," he said with more animation, "all the same, if it hadn't been for Pikčiurnienė. . . . You told me not to go, Trudė, but Pikčiurnienė really did take pity on me and help me. How can I thank God enough for softening her heart! But you know the saying—Heaven's closest to those in trouble."

"You poor devil," said Būblys, smiling sadly. "You haven't an idea how much misfortune you can bring down on yourself. Brought it down already, probably."

Pluta let his head hang and said nothing for a moment. Then he forced out in a choked voice, "Now—it's as God

wills. . . . I'll struggle along somehow. My hands are still strong."

"Well," said Adomas almost in a whisper, "you won't have to struggle long. The noose is being got ready for you. Soon it'll be thrown over your neck. . . . By Pikčiurnienė. Eh, what's the use of this sort of talk? Jurgis, you speak, we're waiting to hear what you can tell us. What are we to do? How are we to break free?"

Then Būblys spoke. He spoke quietly, as though half to himself, but every word was clear. All the time he held his wife's hand, gently playing with her fingers, now and then stroking the head of his son sleeping in his mother's arms. Outside, the wind had died down, the rain had stopped, quietness fell and the moon peeped out through the clouds. In the room everything was so quiet that one could hear the paraffin hissing in the lamp.

Būblys spoke of those who make their bread by the toil of their hands, or at least try to make it, try not to starve. For centuries the struggle has raged between slave-owners and slaves, between landlords and serfs, between factory-owners and workers. And escape must be sought not in the Bible. The Bible promises heaven after death to those who have suffered on earth. But people have risen in revolt against the hell which the exploiters have made of this earth.

"But what are we to do? What must we do to win?" Adomas insisted.

"Organize! Every one of our groups must grow into a regiment, and every regiment into an army. We must run our own lives. For that we need an army, our own army. We've got an example—Russia. . . . There the workers themselves put things in order. They were followed by the peasants. And they didn't let themselves be split, as happened here. Now—why were we split and separated? Because some think like our Pluta, and others like those Adomas spoke of."

"That's true, Būblys, absolutely true!" burst from Staigis who up to now had said nothing. "We mustn't wait, we've got to act."

Dawn was already tinting the sky when the guests left the Būblyses.

Only one evening had passed, but all felt a change. Now there was somebody to whom one could go, to whom one could talk, at least talk! Yes, the war had had its effect. In former times even Staigis kept away from men like Jurgis. Adomas, of course, had had a certain understanding of things even before the war—that was true. He had cursed the rich and the way they ran things, but it stopped at that. Now, as Būblys put it, he knew the cause of the disease.

Only Pluta, standing by his gate and holding out a gnarled hand to Staigis, said uncertainly, "Perhaps God will be merciful to Būblys too. He's an unbeliever, but he's a true heart all the same. Good-night."

18

A rumour flew through Benagai that there was a Spartakist in the village. They'd put him in prison in Berlin, but then they'd let him out, and now here he was in Benagai, ready to start his tricks.

"Of all things!" cried Pikčiurnienė in horror. "What's he come for? Just to kill us all, nothing else! And why? What for? Don't I help the poor? And look at all the people I give work to—where'd they be but for me? And during the war—it was 'Pikčiurnienė! Pikčiurnienė! Give me rye! Give me potatoes! Give me—give me—' And Pikčiurnienė, what did she do? Gave and gave. And now they come, these—! They won't ask if you gave, what you gave, who you give to, they'll just come and kill you like a dog. The whole world's upside-down! But tell me, who is he, this Spartakist? Maybe I know

him? What? Būblys?" Pikčiurnienė's jaw dropped "That's my—"

She nearly said "my brother-in-law."

"That one? My enemy! Well, let him just try something!" she cried threateningly, shaking her fist. "I'm not afraid of any Būblys!"

With a lightened heart—for the dangerous Spartakist had turned out to be only Būblys—she gave her attention to the next things she had to consider.

Those next things were the Šnekutises and Pluta. But the Šnekutis affair went wrong.

Somehow or other that worthless Barbė got hold of money and paid back the debt. . . . Didn't want to sell, if you please. The draggle-tailed bitch! Never mind, I'll get after Pluta! It's about time. Strike while the iron's still hot. Or maybe he'll manage to scrape up some money too and get his notes of hand back. . . .

One morning as she returned from the labourers' hut in Traiškiai, she saw Pluta in the yard. He was waiting for her, eyes down, cap in hand—as it behoved people to stand before Pikčiurnienė.

Ha—Pikčiurnienė knew Pluta like her ten fingers. He would have kissed her hand had it been customary here. He would submit to any demand she might make. But Pikčiurnienė made no demands. Why should she? She had him tight in her fist as it was. And a rope round his neck into the bargain. Yesterday Pikčiurnienė had given that rope a little twitch. Nothing much so far—just a twitch to try the effect.

Let's see what comes of it, she had thought, and drove Pluta's horse into her yard.

"Well—and what do you want?" she asked Pluta innocently.

"You know what I want, mistress."

"What—money again?" said Pikčiurnienė in mock surprise. "No, my friend, I'm not giving you any more. You

don't pay the interest as it is. One of these days I'll have to sue you, to put the bailiff on to you. Just think how much you've had from me already! You'd never seen so much before in your life. I've got your notes of hand, I can add them up for you now, if you like. It's only thanks to my good heart that you're living in Benagai today, Pluta. You're a neighbour, and I was sorry for you. Didn't I give you money for the hospital? And the funeral? But there's a limit to everything. Money doesn't grow on trees. I helped you as long as you were in trouble, but enough's enough!"

"Nay, mistress, I'm not here about money. I want—"

"Oh, so that's it, is it? You want to say that my money's your money?"

"Nay, you've got me all wrong. I want to start working. I've found a place. Carting...."

"Well, get on with it, then!"

"Yes, but how can I get on with it? When I went into the field for the horse this morning, it was gone!"

"What—your horse ran off?" Pikčiurnienė laughed mockingly. "What sort of a farmer are you if you can't even look after your horse!"

"But you've got it! I saw it as soon as I came. Why did you take away my horse? Haven't you enough of your own?"

"Who says I took away your horse? Who's dared tell such a lie? What's this rubbish you're talking? If I had any horse brought in here, it was from my own field, not yours. I didn't even know whose it was."

"But Pikčiurnienė—"

"I'll thank you to talk properly to me—'took away your horse,' indeed! I don't steal horses!"

"Don't mock me. Have pity! I ask you—I beg you—give me back my horse. Can't you see—it's sick, it's all swollen...."

Pluta swallowed a sob.

"Sick?" Pikčiurnienė laughed loudly, enjoying the sight of Pluta's confused misery. "Why's it got swollen all of a sudden? Maybe from eating my clover? You hear me—*my clover!*"

"It was sick yesterday evening, Pikčiurnienė, it wouldn't eat. But I thought it might be better in the morning. It needs medicine...."

"Oh, I've no time to waste arguing with you! Pay three hundred marks damages and take your nag. Or it'll cost you more."

"But Pikčiurnienė, that's nearly what the horse itself is worth! Don't laugh at me!"

"I'm not laughing, I mean what I say. All right, then, you can leave me the horse in lieu of damages. If it gets well I'll pay you the difference, that's to say, I'll take it off your debt; so you'll be that much better off."

"But how can I make the money to pay you what I owe if I haven't a horse?"

"And d'you think you're going carting with a horse that's sick?"

"I can get it cured. Surely you fear God. You go to church. Surely you've a heart in your breast, not just a stone. Surely you're a Christian!"

"And don't Christians have to make a living too? But why should I stand here arguing with a beggar! Get out of here, I've got more important things to think about!"

Pikčiurnienė wanted to go, but Pluta blocked her path, holding out his hands pleadingly.

"But neighbour! Dear, kind neighbour!"

"I'm no neighbour to you! I want no neighbours of your sort! I'm sick of your eternal begging! Pay me three hundred marks damages and take your nag!"

"All right, I'll pay. But not at once. I haven't a *groschen* just now. Add it to what I owe you and let me take my horse. Look at it. . . . Dear God in Heaven, is there no justice in this world?"

"Add it to your debt? Ha! Ha! Ha! Just as though you only owed me a few *groschen*? Out of my way!" Her voice was like the crack of a whip. She marched past him into the house.

Pluta ran off, clutching his head.

What a shock all this was to poor Pikčiurnienė! If Pluta started working, earning money, then—who could tell—he might struggle out of her web, get on his feet again! That mustn't be allowed to happen.

She found Pikčiurna at home, thoughtfully smoking his pipe.

"So you're still here, are you? One might think you'd sold all the land and had nothing to do. You've forgotten that we've three hundred morgen to look after."

"Buše, I don't like this. What's got into you? In the first place we haven't that much land. Secondly—"

"Secondly, all we need to reach three hundred is Pluta's land. And we shall have it, don't you worry about that, my good man! We'll take that land of Pluta's. And there'll be another cottage for labourers too. And then we'll have to think seriously about the Malonės. . . . Are we to go on quarrelling with them about boundaries all our lives?"

"Come to your senses, Buše! Give Pluta that wretched nag of his. He's been here, nearly in tears. He'd mended his cart, got a job with it, and there's the horse gone. Now—that's a bad sort of trick to play on a man, Mother! Let him alone, poor fellow! You can't keep peace with a single neighbour."

"In tears—humph! And now you'll start snivelling in sympathy, eh? You witless loon—I'm ashamed to have such a husband. What was I ever thinking of when I took you? Where'd we be if I was weak-kneed like you? Sitting with our arms round each other and howling? No, thank you, my dear husband! I'm not wasting tears on other people's troubles. Would anyone shed tears over ours? You just see how they'll all rub their hands if we get a

bit of bad luck! But our luck's good, so they can just gnaw their fingers!"

"But haven't you enough horses? What'll you do with that broken-winded nag of Pluta's? And think of the neighbours—what'll they say?"

"It's not a broken-winded nag at all. All it needs is oats and clover. Why, look at it—it's still quite young! A bit small, of course. Can't harness it with any of ours, but for taking milk, say—it'd be all right for that! But what's the use of trying to drum sense into you? You'd give away your last pair of trousers!"

Pikčiurna went out without answering, and Pikčiurnienė began counting her money. She was blind and deaf to everything else, utterly absorbed in her thoughts of the future.

Suddenly the yard dog set up a great barking, and she heard men's voices.

Pikčiurnienė ran to the window.

"Well! The impudence of it! So Pluta's brought Būblys, has he? Two of a kind!"

This was the first time Pikčiurnienė had seen Būblys since his return. She looked at him with curiosity—what was he like now? There was nothing special about him. He was wearing an army tunic and cap. But for some reason he was strolling about the yard as though it all belonged to him, as though he were the master here.

See there, now, the free-and-easy way he stalks around! And Pluta, that moth-eaten runt, gazing at him as though he were Lord God Almighty, or the governor, or the gendarme!

Look at that, look at that! Doesn't even come up to the house, the villain! Doesn't want to ask or bargain or even talk! The vicious cur! Now they're making straight for the horse!

Well, what next? There now!... But—what? Is our Adomas a Spartakist too? The dirty scum! You never

know when you're taking a snake into your bosom! Came back from the army, asked for work. And of course I went and took him. And look what he turns out to be! . . .

Būblys unfastened the horse, which seemed almost at its last gasp, felt its swollen belly and said something to Adomas, who ran into the shed and came back with medicine. Pluta unclenched the horse's teeth and opened its mouth, while Adomas poured the medicine down.

Heavens above, thought Pikčiurnienė, where's that useless man of mine? Never there when he's wanted, goes off and hides somewhere! And here's men coming into our yard, doing whatever they want, making themselves quite at home. . . .

Pikčiurnienė rushed headlong out of the house.

"Have you gone stark, staring, raving mad? What are you doing here? Adomas, are you out of your mind too?" Pikčiurnienė could not think of anything else to say.

"Can't you see for yourself the horse is sick?" said Adomas. "How can you give the poor man back a half-dead horse?"

"Who said I was going to give it back? You snake, you lump of rat poison! Jokūbas! Jokūbas! Where's he got to, that Pikčiurna? . . . Jokūbėlis! . . . And the boy's gone too! Let that horse alone, I tell you! Būblys, how dare you touch anything in my yard!"

"Me? I've come with Pluta to get his horse. Queer, to find it here in your yard!"

"And you, Adomas, sticking your nose in, helping these agitators make trouble! Pluta, you'd better be careful. You'll pay dearly for this! . . . Merciful God, they really are taking the horse! Just like that! As though it was theirs! There's no justice in the world! To be set at naught in my own house! Adomas, stop them!"

"Now you must ride it briskly for a bit," Adomas was calmly telling Pluta. "After the medicine it needs to run for an hour or so."

"Well, why are you standing there? What are you waiting for? To kiss Pikčiurnienė's feet? Get on your horse and go!" cried Būblys.

Pluta had been shifting from foot to foot beside the horse, feeling anything but happy. He was sure this would end badly. Nevertheless, encouraged by Būblys and Adomas, he mounted, struck the horse's sides with his heels and disappeared out of the gate.

But Heavens above, that's robbery! thought Pikčiurnienė. Barefaced robbery! Or is it only the beginning of Spartakist carryings-on? No, Pikčiurnienė's not going to surrender as easily as that!

"Don't you count me as a relation, Būblys," she burst out. "We've not been relations for a long time. And now you come and steal a horse from me! You needn't think I'm going to let that pass!"

Būblys laughed.

"I don't, my dear Buše. One doesn't expect it from your sort. But what's to be done if you've no decency, and play such a trick on a poor man? Someone's got to help him."

"And d'you know what the sentence is for stealing a horse? Five years, and that'll be too little for you, you jail-bird! Hardly got back, and starting your dirty game already! Maybe you think we've no law and order here? Maybe you think we're helpless, and you can just run riot and murder us all in our beds?"

She was still storming when Būblys was far away, and storming she hurried to the gendarme.

That same day the gendarme took Būblys from his home.

The market was a big one and opened early. Before the first cock-crow, the fishmongers were setting out their boxes and blowing on their fingers to take off the chill of

early morning. After all, if there was no trade they had to do something. And there was no trade because there were no buyers, and there were no buyers because the market flag had not gone up on the roof of the district council building. The faded market flag would not rise until six.

Processions of farm carts made their way along the roads. Pigs squealed, sheep bleated, chickens squawked. Every farmer was eager to be among the first to arrive, so as to get a good place. The earlier one came, the better. Those who had fast horses could get well-placed stalls where they would sell their produce quickly and at better prices. Those with horses hardly able to drag themselves along, let alone pull a cart, were just out of luck. By the time they arrived there would be no place left at all, they would have to sell their wares at half price and lucky to get that.

On this particular morning Pikčiurnienė had no reason for going early. She did not intend to sell anything. How could she sit there calmly trading? That needs patience, and all her thoughts were in the court-house. Nevertheless she left early as usual. And she used the Bergeshoch carriage. The trouble was, that worthless farm-hand Krizas, a tall, handsome fellow with a fine moustache who you might say was born to be a coachman—that Krizas said he was ill. Just pretending, of course. No doubt about it! To get ill on a day like this, the kind of day that comes only once or twice in a lifetime! Who'd put him up to it? Būblys was in prison. But it's a true saying—however much you feed a wolf, it always keeps looking back at the forest. Bred in the bone!

Of course, she could have made do with Adomas as coachman. But could she trust him?—that was the question. And on a day like this? No, Heaven forbid—he'd be sure to get up to something! Overturn the carriage in the ditch at the very least . . . try to break his mistress' neck.

They were real devils! They'd no fear of anything—

neither the law nor God. And Adomas—he must have been infected, too, long ago. No, he'd better stay at home.

Pikčiurnienė could not forget how he had given Pluta the horse. Who could? If you ride in my cart, you sing my song. And whose cart was Adomas in? Pikčiurnienė's! Wasn't it her bread he ate? Wasn't it from her he'd be expecting money at Christmas? But whom did he serve? That beggar Pluta! Gave him the horse, and even offered to be a witness. . . . Ha! Ha! Ha! Just the kind of witness judges like!

Adomas had become morose, always thinking about something, turning something over in his mind, talking to nobody. At times it looked as though he was cooking up something bad.

"Jokūbas, you'll have to drive today," Buše told her husband.

"But I always—"

"Today we're going in the carriage."

"Are you crazy?" cried her husband. "Going to market in the carriage again? Folks'll just laugh at us!"

"I'm not going to market. I'm going to the court-house! This is a big day for me. We're going to climb one step higher today!"

"And if you take the small cart—will that stop you winning the case? You'll win just the same!"

"Jokūbas, I know you haven't a scrap of pride in you. If it wasn't for me, you'd harness the dog to the wheelbarrow. It's only I that pulls you out of the mud. . . . Go and harness up! And see that Adomas doesn't play some trick!"

The Bergeshoch carriage rolled out of the Pikčiurna gates, its varnish and silver sparkling in the first rays of the sun. Pikčiurnienė sat alone on the soft cushions. Pikčiurna was on the box, holding the reins and the whip with its silver-mounted handle.

But however swiftly a person tries to drain the cup of

enjoyment, some drop of bitterness is always there at the bottom. Pikčiurnienė had hardly emerged from the gate when she heard a rattling behind. She turned—and there were the Malonės hurrying to market with their half-grown pigs.

Of course it was very pleasant to let them see her riding in her carriage. But was Pikčiurnienė to drive all the way to Priekulė with this tail behind?

“Jokūbas! Drive faster!”

“What for? What the devil will you do there so early? Count the sparrows?” Pikčiurna objected in a sleepy voice.

“Look at Malonė there behind us, you fool!”

“I see him. What of it?”

“I don’t want an escort like that! Can’t you hear the pigs squealing?”

“Let him pass us, then!” Pikčiurna yawned again. “If they’re taking pigs, they want to get there early.” He began to draw aside to make room for his neighbour.

“Heavens, what a dolt! Isn’t there anything you can understand? Horses like these, a carriage like this.... Give me the reins, I’ll drive if you’re such a blockhead and don’t know how to keep up our dignity.”

“Nay, then!” Pikčiurna lashed the horses and they began to gallop, tails in the air. Like the gentry out for a ride!

But do what they might, Malonė, who was eager to get to market, kept close behind the carriage. Pikčiurnienė raged, but nothing helped. And on top of it all, the Malonės kept talking and laughing as loudly as they could and constantly mentioning Pluta, Plutienė....

Finally they arrived in Priekulė.

Pikčiurnienė came to Fish Row just as the market flag rose. She quickly bought and tipped into her bag a number of measures of the cheapest kind of fish for the labourers. After all, you had to give them something. Then she returned to the carriage to stow away her purchases.

"Well, and what d'you think you're doing?"

Pikčiurna was still sitting on the box, smoking his pipe.

"What d'you want now?"

"Move out of the way, I've got to put the fish in here so the flies won't get at it."

"It'll smell by the time we got home, anyway."

"No, it won't. And are you going to stop up here on the box for everyone to stare at you?"

"Where else shall I go? I keep hearing the Malonès. They stuck right behind us on purpose, so we'd hear them saying 'Pluta, Pluta, Pluta' all the time."

"You lump of jelly—always afraid, always thinking of what people say! If I were like that we'd be begging our bread, instead of riding in a carriage."

"We're in a carriage—but people only laugh at us."

He stopped as a cart drawn by a single horse came up. Staigis was driving.

"Look at that, Jurgis—the Pikčiurnas! Look what company we've got into!" cried Staigienė's ringing voice. "Well, Buše dear, so you're going to hang Pluta today, are you?"

"I am! And what are you going to do about it?" Pikčiurnienė snapped.

"Don't start a row with that hag," Staigis warned his wife. "You'll never get the best of her. Don't fret, today she'll hang Pluta, but tomorrow or the day after we'll hang her."

"Buše! Buše!" Staigienė wanted to try and soften her, but Pikčiurnienė was gone. There was still sugar to be bought, and Tilsit cheese, and various spices.

She had no time to bother with Staigis, and Pluta too had small place in her thoughts. For today—today Būblys was to be tried! And this was her doing, hers alone! Pikčiurnienė was so delighted, so drunk with joy that she wanted to stop, cross herself and sing, "Glory, glory alleluia!" But of course she could hardly do that. Had it

been any other day, a Sunday best of all, had there been a service in church, she would have hurried there to thank God for His favour, for having entrusted her and none other with the task of punishing Būblys' wickedness. If he was sentenced to several years' hard labour she would go at once, this very day, and donate a whole fistful of money to the Vangeman or Gosner charities! She was sorry there were no more missions. Folks said all the missionaries had been lost together with the German colonies. But never mind, she'd give to some other cause pleasing to God, there was no lack of those. In Angenburg, and Rastenburg, and Friedland—they all asked for money.

What a pity it was impossible to drive right up to the court-house in her carriage! It would have been wonderful if all the people could have seen Buše alight magnificently from her carriage and leisurely enter the door. Yes, it was a pity, but it couldn't be helped.

The trial was to be at eleven, but Pikčiurnienė was there by ten. Pikčiurna, however, refused to go in so early.

"To have folks gaping at me like some show?" he said.

"Something to gape at!" remarked his wife with biting irony.

It was quite true, Pikčiurna had been no beauty to begin with, and now he was getting old—stooping, inclined to baldness, with a pendulous paunch and clothes that fitted where they touched. Pikčiurna had no liking for courts in general—especially since the day when he stood up in one face to face with his sister, looked her in the eyes and swore that she was demanding her share of the inheritance a second time, that she had had it long ago.

Pikčiurnienė walked majestically into the court-house corridor. She still held herself erect. Her hair, it was true,

showed traces of grey. If my hair weren't so dark, there'd be no grey to be seen yet, she thought. Her eyes had not faded, they were as dark as ever. And her face would be unlined too if those neighbours didn't give her so much worry. . . . Pikčiurnienė looked about her. The other people waiting fell silent when they saw her.

But her triumphant mood quickly subsided. She did not know where to go next, what to do with herself. She badly wanted to go through one of the many doors marked "Presiding Judge" or "Prosecutor" or "Lawyer" or even simply "Office"—some door, any door that was not open to all, to go in for everybody to see it. But her courage failed her. Perhaps she would be treated with politeness; but, perhaps, too, she would be curtly asked what she wanted. It would be so very humiliating to have to crawl back again. Though maybe—the lawyer?

Who were those, over there?

Four people stood in a corner at the end of the corridor, in front of a window with the sunshine streaming in. She ought to go and see who they were—the sunshine blinded her. And she wanted to see. Perhaps she knew them. The worst of it was, they stood with their backs to her, as though they did not want to see her. Pikčiurnienė coughed. It sounded almost challenging in the quietness of the corridor.

Then suddenly—! If thunder had come down from the blue sky, Pikčiurnienė would have been less surprised.

"Adomas! But who's at home?"

Yes, it was her farm-hand who had offered to be a witness and had evidently been summoned.

"I'm asking you—who's at home, since you've taken it on yourself to leave?"

"I haven't any home! Not yet!"

"I'm not interested in any home of yours! What I want to know is, who's left in my house, with the horses, with—"

"You've got other slaves besides me."

"Well, of all the impudence! Just got up and marched off!"

"What else could I do? You didn't take me in the carriage, so I had to walk it." Adomas clasped his hands behind his back and leaned against the window.

"Who gave you permission? Who told you to come?"

"It's an order from the court!" Adomas shrugged his shoulders. "The order of the court must be obeyed!"

"Who called you as a witness?"

"Pluta," Adomas answered indifferently.

Pikčiurnienė laughed with angry contempt, but there was a note of alarm too in her laughter.

"And you dare to testify against me? You? You?!" Pikčiurnienė could not find words sufficiently abusive. She had used them all too often, they were threadbare, devoid of weight, utterly inadequate in the face of this insolence on the part of Adomas. "You cur!" she said finally.

"Cur yourself! I haven't bitten anyone yet."

"And now you think you're going to bite me? You'll break your teeth! Don't—"

It was only now that she saw Trudė Būbliienė standing beside Adomas, and Pluta with his daughter. What was the girl doing here? What did she want? Was a chit of a girl like that to be a witness? So there was a whole gang come!

At that moment a door creaked, and a lawyer appeared on the threshold. Seeing Pikčiurnienė, he bowed, greeted her politely, and taking her elbow, led her into his office. As she passed through the door, she felt as though she were treading a carpet spread out for her feet to tread.

Dear God, what an honour! The lawyer himself taking her by the elbow and leading her into his office, in front of everybody! As she entered she glanced back just once—

was Trudė looking? But those ill-conditioned churls had turned to the window again.

Pikčiurnienė entered the court-room with her lawyer when everybody else was already seated.

Beyond the barrier were seats for the public. They were all full. She saw Malonė and Malonienė, Staigis with his wife, and the Kojelises, and many others whom she knew. And in front of them all, right by the barrier sat Trudė Būblienė.

That was what made it so pleasant to come in with the lawyer.

Pikčiurnienė seated herself on the chair which the lawyer placed for her with his own hands. She sighed, straightened her kerchief, straightened her dress—she wanted to look as important as she possibly could.

“Let the plaintiff speak!”

The plaintiff was Buše Pikčiurnienė, *née* Karne-likė.

Pikčiurnienė rose and stood beside her lawyer. . . . How impressive this must look, she thought, her vanity immensely tickled.

The only snag was that she did not know which language to use. She wanted everybody to understand her without any interpreter—the German judges and also the public, many of whom did not know German. . . . Eh dear, now why can't the judge be Lithuanian?—she sighed inwardly. All the rest are—the two parties and the witnesses, and the audience too!

There was the interpreter—with the pleasant name of Švelnius.* He coughed, ready to begin his duties. The secretary examined his pen nib.

Well, make the best of it, then. Anyhow, she would deliver her speech and everybody would hear it, the speech of Buše Pikčiurnienė—everybody, Germans and Lithua-

* *Švelnius*—affectionate.

nians. And she too coughed, straightened her kerchief again and folded her hands.

"I am a farmer, I have a big farm," she began weightily. "God has been my stay and support. By His sacred mercy I have brought the farm almost to an estate. But to my sorrow I have neighbours whom I simply can't get rid of, they'd drown me in a spoonful of water if they could, they'd snatch the last crust from my mouth, and since they can't do that, they try to make my life a misery every way they can."

At this point she turned towards Pluta and Būblys, sitting in the dock. Her glance passed contemptuously over Pluta's face and came to rest on that of Būblys. And he answered her look. His eyes seemed to say, You are just a wretched worm. I've trodden on your tail, and soon I'll crush your head.

Pikčiurnienė stammered and lost the thread of what she wanted to say. The carefully prepared, impressive speech which was to have amazed all broke off short. She tried to collect her thoughts, coughed again, again straightened her kerchief. But it was no good—she could not find a single one of those words she had put together during the night and thought she knew so well.

"Go on, Pikčiurnienė, let's have some more!" Būblys encouraged her.

But the presiding judge stopped him. The defendant had not yet the right to speak. He asked Pikčiurnienė what charge she brought against Pluta.

Ah yes, that was it! But it could not be told in two words, it must all be explained clearly, and in detail. She accused Pluta of purposely, deliberately and maliciously trying to spite her. Yes, to spite her! He was heavily in debt to her, and the notes of hand she held showed that he no longer had anything to pay with. But in spite of that, in spite of the fact that he could not even pay interest, he deliberately flouted her. Hardly a day

passed but he drove his beasts on to her fields. At last her patience gave out and she led his horse into her yard, because it had been turned into her clover; and all this was because he had nowhere to pasture his beasts.

"He's got nothing to feed his children, and he keeps a horse! He must have thought I wouldn't see it. So he feeds his horse till it can eat no more and then takes it back home, as though it were all quite right and proper! But dear Lord in Heaven, is it my fault if he's a beggar, if he's got nothing? All I can say is—why does a man keep a horse when he can't feed it? Spawned a houseful of children, and then comes round looking miserable with his 'Give! Give!' Why is it that decent, solid farmers don't have all those children?"

Since this serious, weighty question received no answer, she thought for a moment, and concluded: "Well, then, I charge Pluta with pasturing his beasts on my fields, and Būblys with taking, with stealing, a horse I had impounded."

With those words she took her seat again.

The first witness to be examined was Benagys of Benagiai, a stout man with a round, pleasant face and the comfortable assurance that he was invariably right, and that he could never say an unsuitable word because he was always courteous. He looked at Pluta with commiseration and began his testimony.

He had been walking beside the irrigation ditch on his way to visit the village elder when he had seen Pluta driving a horse towards the boundary of Pikčiurnienė's field. (He stressed the word *Pikčiurnienė*.) It was a field of oats. And everybody knew her fields were the best in Benagiai. Of course as soon as the horse saw the oats it plunged in, trailing the rope and stake behind it, and disappeared in them, because the oats were so tall.

"But Pikčiurnienė said she found the horse in the clover!" Būblys put in.

The presiding judge again called him to order—more sharply this time.

Benagys was confused, but Pikčiurnienė quickly came to his rescue.

"But that's how it was!" she hurried to explain. "The horse must have been in the oats first. Yes, I remember now. It fed there till it had eaten all it could, and then it went into the clover and ate it all. It was there all night."

"What a horse! Five elephants couldn't have done all the damage one little horse has done!" Būblys interrupted again.

Thereupon the judge shouted that if he, Būblys, dared to speak one more word he would be removed and charged with contempt of court.

"But I'm in prison already!" Būblys retorted.

The judge affected not to hear that, and Pikčiurnienė made a quick mental somersault and corrected herself.

"It didn't eat up all on the field, of course, but it trampled it and spoiled it. It was there the whole night! And the horse is a young one, it started rolling in the oats. A pity they're reaped now, or you could have gone there yourself, Your Honour, you'd have seen that the oats were ruined. All the ears broken—at least, nearly all," she conceded. "Well, so I led that horse home and tied it up in the yard. And then all of a sudden I saw Pluta come along with Būblys, take the horse and lead it away. And I hadn't asked a thing of Pluta except that he pay for the damage done, and I'd put it quite low. That's the sort of person I am. I wouldn't hurt a fly, or tread on a worm if I could help it, let alone being hard on a human being. But I want everything fair, I want right and justice. But what did Pluta do? He just laughed at me, jeered at me, brought Būblys along and took the horse. . . . And as for what that Būblys said—! Your Honour, it's all

written down, you have it there. And I want to ask you—has that out-at-elbows beggar the right to insult me like that?”

So that the law and justice should be fully observed, the judge called one more witness for the prosecution, Vainorienė. She entered with rapid steps and halted before the table, prepared for anything.

“What do you know about the case?” she was asked.

“Who—me?”

“Yes.”

“I know that Mrs. Pikčiurnienė found Pluta’s horse in her clover.”

“Did you see that the horse was in the clover?”

“What—me? Yes, I saw it.”

“What else did you see?”

“What else did I see?”

“Did you see how the horse got there?”

“Yes, I saw Pluta lead the horse out of the stable late at night.” To make it sound more realistic, she added, “Now think for yourself what sort he is! He rode up to Pikčiurnienė’s boundary, looked round, then took off the bridle, gave the horse a slap and drove it right into Pikčiurnienė’s clover.”

“Are you quite sure of all that? Perhaps he didn’t ride the horse, but walked it and then sent it into the clover?”

“He sent the horse into the clover, and then ran off home as quick as he could.”

“But didn’t he drive the horse into the oats?”

“What—the oats? No, this is the first time I’ve heard of any oats!” the witness confessed innocently.

There was a burst of laughter in the hall.

The presiding judge first touched the bell, then rang it loudly. When the laughter had died down somewhat, he announced that he would order the court cleared if silence was not preserved; at the same time he made a gesture and the witness sat down, red as a lobster. She

did not notice that Būblienė was sitting just behind her, on the other side of the barrier.

"How much did Pikčiurnienė pay you for that tale?" Trudė asked, leaning over the barrier to speak into the witness' ear. The woman started and turned white as a sheet.

"Is it me you're asking?"

But now Pluta was called. The court-room was very quiet. All eyes were fixed on the defendant as he rose—miserable, tormented, stooping, with reddened eyes and grey, unshaven face—to speak, to defend himself. But he had never been in a court-room before, he had never had to stand up in front of such important gentlemen, and he would rather have sunk through the earth, he would rather have been struck dumb for ever, than make a speech in his own defence. Oh, why was he so poor, why could he not pay a lawyer to speak for him? That was the only thought in his mind. His hands trembled, his lips moved but no sound came out. It looked as though there and then, in front of everybody, he was about to fall on his knees before his tormentor, before Pikčiurnienė, and plead for mercy. But no, he did not kneel, it only looked as though he might—but one cannot always judge a man's intentions by his outward looks.

"What can you say in your defence?"

The judge's tone was loftily offhand; evidently he saved his courtesy for those who did not come with empty hands. Pluta, who brought no bribe, had little to hope for.

"Why is Mrs. Pikčiurnienė so unjust?" Pluta answered. "The time will come when she too will have to answer before the throne of God!"

Būblys nudged him and whispered—so that only Pluta could hear, "Simpleton!"

But Pluta could not understand why he was a simpleton; after all, if he called on God's name, they ought to understand that he was an honest man. What else was

there for him to do? No, he had not let his horse into either the oats or the clover, it was God's truth. He had never even thought of such a thing. He was a God-fearing man and never tried to take what wasn't his, and never would.

"What?" cried Pikčiurnienė. "I take God as my witness that everything was exactly as I have said! May God strike me dead where I stand if I have lied! Well? You see, Pluta, I'm still alive! Are you trying to say my witnesses are lying? Do you want a charge of slander too, on top of the other? I myself told them to say nothing but the truth. Who dare say that Mr. Benagys lies!"

Pikčiurnienė sat down again, sure that she had been both weighty and convincing—after all, the lawyer himself had nodded at her approvingly.

"But all the same, Mrs. Pikčiurnienė, all this isn't only because of the horse! That's just—that's just—" Pluta looked helplessly at Būblys. "How can I say it? It's that you want to drive me off my farm, and that's why you've started all this about the horse."

"Crazy!"

"I've nothing more to say. You talk, Pikčiurnienė, all you want!"

Pikčiurnienė was quite ready to open her mouth again, but after all, the court does have its order of procedure, so the judge hastily began to question Būblys—what did he want in Pikčiurnienė's yard and why did he interfere in things that weren't his business?

"Why wasn't it my business?" asked Būblys. "How could I let a poor man be treated like that? And why do you allow Pikčiurnienė to go on lying?"

"You will please keep to the point, Būblys! It's not for you to say who's lying and who isn't!"

"But I say again—she's lying, and lying impudently. Pluta spoke the truth—she's started all this fuss about a horse just because she wants somehow or other to drive a

neighbour she hates off his farm. The end justifies the means. And the best man on earth can't live in peace if a vindictive neighbour won't let him."

"Būblys!"

"Very well, very well, we'll talk about the horse... I went with Pluta to the field to take a look at that so-called damage, that terrible loss. I did not see any clover trampled or crushed or eaten. As for oats—nobody had ever heard of them then. The oats are quite a new idea, presented here for the first time by the highly honoured Benagys of Benagiai. The clover was flowering, and I didn't see a single broken stalk. And now, gentlemen, allow me to ask how something else could have happened. When Pluta went to look for his horse, he found the peg to which it had been tied still in the ground, just as he had driven it in, and the end of a rope dangling from it. At first he thought the horse really had broken the rope and run off. But when we looked at it together, we saw that it had been cut... Now—the first witness said that he saw Pluta pull the peg out of the ground and drive the horse into the oats, dragging the rope and peg after it. And the most honoured witness Vainorienė, whom nobody has ever seen in Benagiai, says that Pluta rode to the field. Gentlemen, please take note—Pluta rode to the field, took off the bridle, and so far as we can understand from her words, drove the horse into Pikčiurnienė's clover without any rope on. As for the oats, she's never even heard of them... Pikčiurnienė, why did you cut the rope the horse was tied with, and how much did you promise your witnesses for committing perjury?"

"What business is that of yours, you dirty Spartakist?"

"Aha! Did you hear that?" Būblys turned to the public. There was a stir in the court-room.

"Pikčiurnienė! I really would like to know why you cut the rope?"

"Did you see me do it?"

"A blind man could see it."

At this point the presiding judge broke in again with "I warn you for the last time. Confine yourself to the case, and answer the question—why did you interfere in other people's business?"

"To help Pluta, of course!"

"And against your wife's own sister?" cried Pikčiurnienė, forgetting herself. "You shameless rascal!"

"What!" Būblys seemed thoroughly amazed. "Have I become a relation again all of a sudden? You yourself said we weren't relations any more, and I was very glad to hear it. But there's one more thing I can tell you: I wouldn't defend my own sister if she'd got up to such vile tricks."

"You haven't got a sister! You're a monster! You—no, I won't lower myself to talk about you! Your Honour, don't let that villain go on!" she screamed. "Can't you see he's starting to agitate for that—that—what's it called?—for communism! Can't you see he's making revolution? He can't stand seeing that I've got something and he's a beggar! That's why he's defending another beggar! They'd rob us and plunder us and kill us all if there weren't the police and the courts to defend us poor farmers. Who knows what might have happened to us if Būblys hadn't been arrested at once, that very same day? He'd have broken all my poor bones!"

Pikčiurnienė felt so sorry for her poor bones that she began to weep.

"Can I ever forget how he threatened me?! He might take and burn the whole farm down, or even worse than that!... What was he doing all that time in Berlin? Why was he so long coming back? No need to ask—he was murdering people there. And now he's come to murder us all too...."

"Your Honour, why doesn't Pikčiurnienė confine herself to the case?" asked Būblys and continued: "I wouldn't

dirty my hands with such as Pikčiurnienė, though she ought to be crushed like the poisonous snake she is!"

"You hear that; you hear what he says?" screamed Pikčiurnienė.

"The days of blood-suckers like that are numbered. . . ."

"Remove Būblys at once!" shouted the presiding judge. "His case will be handed over to the public prosecutor!"

"Ah!" Pikčiurnienė had been on thorns all the time Būblys had been speaking. She sat down with a sigh of relief.

But the public, who had been showing signs of disturbance for some time, now made themselves heard.

"Let him speak!"

"Let him go on!"

"Why d'you gag a man who tells the truth?"

"Down with the wealthy! Long live justice!"

The judge rang his bell frantically, then banged the table with his fist.

"Clear the court at once and shut the doors! This is a trial, not a political meeting!" he shouted.

As Būblys was taken out, he turned and called to the people in his vibrant voice, "Never mind! Flies bite worse in autumn before they die!"

A roar of approval answered him. Then a big detachment of police seemed to spring up from nowhere. Pushing and cursing, they drove the people out.

Būblys was put into solitary confinement.

"He can agitate the walls all he likes," remarked the governor of the prison.

Trudė Būblienė followed her husband at a little distance right up to the prison gates. As though he felt her near presence, he turned round as he passed through.

Their eyes met, and Trudė returned to the court-house almost elated.

A crowd of people were still waiting before the building. Everybody wanted to know how the Pluta case would end.

Was it possible Pikčiurnienė could win? Anybody could see her claims were weak and her witnesses bribed. That was the general opinion of the people standing round about the door.

Half an hour passed, or perhaps more—nobody looked at the clock—and then Pluta came out. He was staggering, and laughing uncontrollably.

"Pikčiurnienė's driven a man mad now!" somebody gasped.

Pluta swayed and staggered down the steps as though drunk, clutching at the banisters so as not to fall. And he laughed and laughed! His shaking head hung on his chest and tears fell in bright drops from his eyes, rolling down the rough surface of his cheap coat. Trudė Būblienė ran up the steps to meet him and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Martynas, you mustn't. You're a man, don't let yourself cry because of a creature like that! All's not lost yet! We'll get justice somehow!"

"Nay, I'm laughing! Can't you see? Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha!"

"The comedy is over," said Staigis, coming up to them. "If it weren't such a murderous one, you really could laugh."

"Pull yourself together, Martynas, I tell you!" Trudė could find nothing more to say, tears were rising in her own eyes.

Just then Adomas emerged and came up to Pluta.

"What devil's work's been going on here? Why weren't your witnesses called? Anė? Me?"

"They were afraid you might say the same thing my

husband did," Trudė answered. "And maybe more. . . . And it might have ended with one strong labourer the less for Pikčiurnienė."

"Pik-čīur-nienė! Pik-čīur-nienė!" Buše mimicked her sister, as she came down the steps; she had heard the last word. "Well, has Pikčiurnienė shown you what she can do?"

Then she saw the laughing Pluta. But she did not see the tears streaming from his eyes, just as she had not seen Anė Plutikė weeping in the court-house corridor.

"Hu!—you'll be laughing the other side of your face when you come to your senses a bit! . . . Adomas, you still here? You ought to have been home long ago."

"I won't set foot in your house again if you beg me on your bended knees!"

"I'll find another man, then. You can go and work for Pluta if you like! You wanted to be his witness, didn't you?"

"One of these days you'll see the witness I'll be!"

The crowd parted grudgingly to let Pikčiurnienė through. She looked at the faces as she passed. But nowhere could she find sympathy or approval. She heard only an ominous murmur and loud cries: "Blood-sucker!" "Fiend!" "Leech!"

Pikčiurnienė's composure cracked.

"Who's a leech? Who's a blood-sucker?" she cried. "Whose blood have I ever sucked? What d'you want of me? I simply defend my rights!"

And in such a blissful moment, leaving the court-house after defeating a bitterly hated enemy, pocketing his land and gaining more wealth, after being treated with such respect, proudly conscious of being envied by all—why else would they shout?—to go and stumble!

Pikčiurnienė stumbled, and fell.

"Beak in the gutter!" someone cried, and then they all laughed.

"That was the little Pluta boy shot Pikčiurnienė into the mud! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Pikčiurnienė clutched at the earth with both hands, then quickly raised her eyes, trying to understand what had happened.

"Look at that now, good folks! No one's ever been able to trip up Pikčiurnienė before, but that little lad's done it!"

Amid roars of laughter she got to her feet again; she needed to push her hair out of her eyes and straighten her kerchief which was all on one side, but there was no time to bother about that—first she must deal with that brat.

"You wait, you young devil!"

Pikčiurnienė grabbed at the boy, but he twisted out of her clutch like an eel and ran off, stopping to hop about on one foot and jeer at her frantic efforts to catch him.

"See that?" someone hooted. "Pikčiurnienė wants to take a kid to court now!"

There was a roar of laughter. "But he hasn't any land, Pikčiurnienė!"

She did not catch the boy, of course, he disappeared as though the earth had swallowed him. She ran to her carriage which stank to Heaven of rotting fish. She did not wait for her husband but seized the reins and, standing, lashed the horses and galloped out of Priekulė.

The horses ran at top speed, overtaking people on their way home from market. Pedestrians stopped and stared open-mouthed after the carriage driven by a woman standing at her full height, her hair flying in the wind, her kerchief on one side, her face dirty and her eyes protruding wildly. Leaning forward over the box, she lashed the horses again and again. The carriage flew like the wind leaving a cloud of dust and a stink.

That laughter! . . . God! If only Malonienė had not been there, if only the Kojelises, Staigises—and Trudė—had not seen it all! But there they all were, as though for

spite. What were they expecting, the out-at-elbows rascals? . . . One thing was good, though, they had seen her victory today! But then, for that brat to go and play such a trick!

Just think of it! Now, where was the respect due to his elders and betters, to solid, respectable people? Evidently even a laurel wreath has its thorns, and the best wine holds a drop of bitterness. . . .

The servants were amazed when the carriage came thundering into the yard. Pikčiurnienė was now seated, but she was still covered with mud and her hair disordered (she had lost her kerchief on the way); the sides of the foam-spattered horses were heaving wildly.

"Did the horses bolt?" a sharp-tongued girl called Ilžė Perkūnikė asked innocently. "Where's Pikčiurna?"

"None of your business. . . . Take the fish out from under the box and clean them. They're for your dinner tomorrow."

Ilžė started rummaging in the carriage.

"Where is it, that fish?"

"What's that you're holding, wench?"

"Call that fish? It's carrion. We're not going to eat that! Eat it yourself, if you think it's so good!"

"That's enough! You'll find yourselves eating plain potatoes yet, you ill-conditioned scum!"

That night Pikčiurna came home on foot, very late. He had evidently been ploughing with his nose, as the saying goes, for he was as wet and muddy as though he had lain in every ditch he passed.

"Has the foul fiend got into you, rolling you in the dirt? Pity he didn't break your neck!"

"I've c-come safe, all ri'. B-but you, it'll take an axe to finish you off! Beat your face in!" the loving husband said thickly. "How did ye like it today? Suit you? Ran off all d-dirty! Heel! Heel! Heel!"

Pikčiurnienė gritted her teeth. She did not want a

quarrel just now, her mind was occupied by something else. But what that something was she could hardly have told anybody, she hardly even knew clearly.

On returning from the court-house, Pikčiurnienė had suddenly discovered an interesting thing—she could see Pluta's cottage quite well through the trees from her own house. How was it she had never noticed that before? But today, as though something had drawn her, she had gone over to one of the windows, looked out and seen it.

There was nothing special about it. A clay hut with a thatched roof. The straw was weathered, in some places the bare rafters showed through. Something white gleamed on the window—probably a piece of paper replacing a broken pane. Apart from that the window was dead black; and looked deep as a precipice.

Of course it looked like that now, when Pikčiurnienė had not yet crossed the threshold. But then . . . then!

Again the drop of bitterness! A cluster of children were sitting by the cottage. And they just kept on sitting there. No matter how often Pikčiurnienė looked out—and she looked out frequently—she always saw that cluster of children. Dusk fell, then darkness, and still they were there.

Among them was a little girl in a red kerchief. She would jump up, run about and then sit down again in the very middle, as though afraid of something.

Yes, how old had Trudė been then? Five, maybe, not more. And she had looked exactly like that one, over there.

For some moments Buše Pikčiurnienė forgot all around her; she was back in the far-distant days of her youth.

It was a holiday of some kind, and the whole family had gone away. Only she, Buše, the eldest, had stayed to mind the house, and Trudė, the youngest, had been left in her care. Buše fed the cattle with little Trudė running after her all the time. . . . That was all there was to it, nothing at all, really! Only Buše suddenly saw

Trudè before her, as she had been then. She had been so small and slight, in a grey frock that was too long and twisted round her legs when she ran. Her grey stockings were in holes, and the bare flesh peeped out from her clogs. The clogs clattered when she ran, because they were cracked and fastened together with wire. (Looking at Pluta's little girl running about, Pikčiurnienė could almost hear the clatter of clogs.) Trudè wore a red kerchief tied at the back, so that her head looked like a little red ball. She always wanted Buše to be pleased with her, so she began talking about things Buše would like.

"Buše, dear Buše, when you get on in the world" (Buše always spoke of getting on in the world) "will you be rich?"

"Well, what do you think!"

"I'll be big too, then, Buše—as big as that—" she raised her hands as high as they would go. "And then I'll say: 'Buše, you go and rest, and I'll feed the pigs and milk the cows!...' Buše, don't run away from me!"

Little Trudè was afraid of the darkness, especially dark corners, and dusk was falling. So she ran after Buše and clutched at her skirt.

"Buše, when you're afraid to be alone in the dark I'll take you with me."

They went into the cow-house. All the corners there were terribly dark. Buše wanted to give her sister a scare, so she tore herself away, ran out into the yard and hid. Trudè, terribly frightened, ran after her, but the shed had a high threshold, very high for the little girl. She put one hand on it, got a leg over, then the other—and fell right down in the mud. She got up again very quickly so that Buše should not see. . . . But then she found that she was all dirty, and wet through. She wiped her hands on her muddy frock; they were so cold and red that they stood out against the dark material like little maple leaves in autumn.

Buše ran to her and struck her on the back.

"I'll teach you to roll about in the dirt! Go straight home and sit on the stove-top, I tell you! Why d'you have to keep following me round like a puppy?"

Trudė's eyes were weeping, but her little mouth was smiling and she tried her best to please her sister. She no longer ventured to hold on to Buše's skirt, however, so she ran along in front or behind and her cold hands, and her little bare heels, and the kerchief on top—all were red. . . .

Pikčiurnienė passed both hands over her face.

Of all the silly things to think of! All that's needed now is to start snivelling. . . . No, I'm not doing anything like that. But why do those children keep sitting there, like grit in my eye? As though they'd been put there for spite, to—to make me—

Pikčiurnienė did not dare follow up that thought to the end. She would have liked to send somebody to drive the children away, drive them off with a whip if need be.

But Heavens, who would do it? And she couldn't go herself!

Before she went to bed she took another look, although she could not expect to see anything now that it was dark. But she did see something. A light, a weak, lonely, flickering light that disappeared and then appeared again. . . . Like a wandering unquiet spirit, Pikčiurnienė thought uneasily.

As soon as she was in bed she heard again that loud laughter, she thought she could even hear Malonienė's voice saying, "Pikčiurnienė! Pikčiurnienė!"

"Ugh—the bitch!"

Jumping out of bed, Pikčiurnienė threw something over her shoulders and ran out into the yard, to the gate separating the Pikčiurna house from the Malonės'. But

nobody was there, nobody at all. The windows were dark, the house silent.

In the yard the dog scratched himself and yawned loudly. Then he turned round and round, and at last curled himself up to sleep.

Not a single living soul in sight.

I must be going crazy, she thought. I'll be seeing ghosts next, and running about the fields!

Pikčiurnienė was thoroughly angry with herself.

As she was falling asleep, she again heard the voice of her lawyer. How beautifully he had spoken! Every word went straight to the heart. And the things he had said about such creatures as Būblys and Pluta—"A pestilent seed brought from the East"—yes, that was what he said—"already brought from the East into our country.... The seed called communism. If we do not stamp it down—" What else did he say? Well, yes, he didn't say much, but it was very fine and full of a lot of new words that even the interpreter did not know. So Pikčiurnienė had not understood it all. But that he was against men like Būblys, this she had understood well enough.

And that Pluta!—Pikčiurnienė laughed sleepily. They made him stand to hear the decision read, and the way he flopped down—!

At this point Pikčiurna returned and interrupted her musings.

What was up with him? It wasn't the first time he had been drunk, but he had never stammered before....

When Pikčiurna fell asleep at the table and then rolled on to the floor, Pikčiurnienė went to take another look through the window.

The light in Pluta's hut still flickered....

PART TWO

1

The years were passing. The daughters of Kānelis of Benagiāi were getting old. And these years had brought many events.

Barbē Šnekutienė became a matchmaker and often visited clients for whom she had found suitable partners. It was quite a pleasant, carefree life. But as time went on things became worse, because the young men learned to find wives themselves and no longer went to a matchmaker.

Šnekutis had been a hard worker in his youth and earned good money. Summer and winter he found odd jobs in addition to running his farm, to keep his family well off and his wife contented. He tried to save a bit for his old age too, but nothing came of that. People said it was Barbē's fault, she was idle and thought only of getting new clothes, hanging all kinds of trinkets on herself, eating well, sleeping late and gossiping.

Misfortunes came. Their daughter had a baby when she was little more than a child herself. That was because of the war, with soldiers about everywhere. . . . The elder son came back from the front lacking a leg. The second son fell off a table when he was a child, hurt his head and remained an idiot for the rest of his life; he could not go to school, he could do no work, only wandered about the fields and played with the children. They could not send him to a home because that would cost money.

"And where are we to get it?" Šnekutienė wailed.

With all these troubles, Šnekutis took to drink; there were times when he did not know his own name.

Six months after that memorable trial when Pikčiurnienė put Pluta off his farm, Būblys returned from prison.

He found his wife and child in the direst want. Trudė was working for anyone who would hire her, waiting patiently for his return. With hard toil she earned enough to hire a horse for bringing in fuel for the winter, and to buy seed potatoes. She had to work several weeks for the right to use three or four furrows of land and a scrap of poor pasture for the goat. And three or four hundred-weight of grain cost her not weeks, but months of work. Women's labour was cheap, the farmers wanted men. A woman's work was miserably paid—only half as much as a man's.

Besides this, Trudė took the child with her when she went to work. That meant the child was fed too. And who would give that extra food for nothing?

But this was not the worst of it.

People began avoiding Trudė.

"The wife of Būblys the convict."

That was what many called Trudė, although there was no other Būblys in the place. Previously, before the war, they had called her simply "Trudė," or sometimes "Trudė Karnelikė"—maybe from old custom, maybe because she had not been married in church. But now Būblys was in prison she had become "The wife of Būblys the convict."

"That jail-bird Būblys' wife is here again. . . . Begging. . . ."

"Let her go to her Reds. Why does she come crawling round us?"

"She says she'll work it off."

"Work it off? When? To give her anything's like throwing it in the water. Except that you'd see bubbles there,

But with her—! And a child, too! Feed the pair of them! Tell her we've got all the hands we need."

That was how the rich farmers talked of Trudė Būblienė.

Of course there were people who would gladly have helped her—but they themselves were squeezed by the big men. They had no land of their own and could give neither bread nor work. They lived from hand to mouth as it was. But even Malonė, Kojelis and other small farmers began to avoid Būblienė too. "Just to be on the safe side," they said.

Her only real friends were the Staigises. They themselves were not very well off, but they helped Trudė Būblienė all they could. She and Viktoriukas were like part of the family.

When Būblys came home, he found work on a bridge-building job. But it did not last long. Somebody told the boss he was agitating the workers to demand higher wages and to strike if they were refused.

Troubles never come singly.

Būblys went off to look for work somewhere else. For three days there was no news of him and Trudė was beside herself with anxiety.

Then one day as she sat worrying beside the child's bed, the landlord Raudonis burst into the room without knocking.

"I've been patient all these years and said nothing!" he shouted. "But now I've had enough! I've had enough, I tell you, Būblienė!"

Trudė guessed at once what it was all about and to tell the truth was rather alarmed, but did not show it. She summoned all her will-power, controlled herself and answered not without irony, "Are you sick, master?"

"Sick? You've got the impudence to laugh at me?"

"Why, of course not!"

"When I tell you what I'm sick of, you won't feel so

much like laughing. All through the war I got no good out of this house at all. When I needed a labourer I hadn't one. But I didn't say anything. It's the war, I thought, what's to be done! But Būblys came back at last—and how much use was he to me? First thing, he was behind bars! And all the neighbours talking—why do I keep a Spartakist, a jail-bird? I've stood it a long time because I'm a Christian! Now I've had enough!"

"But prisons are built for men, not dogs!" Trudė laughed. "You might find yourself there some day too. It can happen to anyone. Don't be too sure it won't happen to you!"

"None of your sauce! Get out of here, the quicker the better! Where's Būblys? I want to speak to him."

"Why? Haven't you said it all to me?"

"I don't bargain with women."

"I'm not bargaining. Don't think that Jurgis is going to ask anything of you. And remember one thing—we've paid you ten times as much as this hut is worth—this heap of clay. In all justice it's been ours a long time, not yours. But don't be afraid, don't worry, we'll go away and make you a present of it! The floor's rotten, the ceiling's falling down, the roof leaks. You never thought it necessary to repair your hut. You only squeezed money out of us, and pushed more work on to us than an ox could get through! We're going, Raudonis! Good-bye!"

Raudonis felt more than uncomfortable—for Būblienė had spoken some very unpalatable truths.

"You know me, I'm not a hard man!" he started to justify himself. "But the neighbours— Well, I've told you—you can have fourteen days' notice. . . . Pikčiurnienė, your sister—she's looking for labourers. And there's Pluta's cottage, I heard there are two rooms empty. . . ."

But Būblienė picked up the child and went out of the room.

Būblys returned in high spirits. He had found work somewhere near the city.

Without waiting for the two weeks to expire, the Būblys went away to the new job.

The Šilbakises removed to the city as well.

"Got to give the children some schooling," Šilbakis explained when Buše attacked him.

She had come storming over as soon as she heard of her sister's intended departure. She thoroughly disapproved.

"Why don't you send them out to work?" she panted.

"To you, maybe? Ha! Ha! Ha! That would just suit you, wouldn't it! You'd be saying, 'It's all in the family! Why should I pay them? They ought to be glad I've taken them in and given them work. I feed them, don't I?' No, Buše dear, don't hope for it! Not on your life! I've worked for other people all my days, and all my days I've eaten black crusts! I've had enough of it! I want my children to have something better."

"A nice idea! So you think it'll be heaven in the city, eh? And me, how much of that white bread d'you think I eat?"

Pikčiurnienė wanted to strike the table with her fist, but remembered why she had come, swallowed her rage, put on a smile and asked whether Šilbakis would sell her the farm. It was only a small one, of course, and not worth much. But after all—such close relations! And in the city it would always come in handy to get a few hundredweight of potatoes or a sack of flour over and above wages. . . .

"I'd never grudge anything. You ought to know what a good heart I have."

"Oh, we've known that a long time!"

What jeering tone that devil used! If only she could have knocked the words down his throat! But she had to let it pass. "You see, then!" Buše continued. "So why—"

"It's sold," Magdè answered curtly.

"And for a good price," Šilbakis added. "They didn't even haggle."

"What did you get? Maybe I wouldn't have haggled either."

"You? You wouldn't have haggled?! You'd have made us crawl on our knees before you'd have let a *groschen* out of your hand. And why should I do that? I'm still strong and healthy. I can fend for myself and my family too."

"Well, go then, in God's name! You'll just find yourself in prison like Būblys! I'll have a good laugh at you then!"

"Go along, go along, 'in God's name!'" said Šilbakis, showing plainly that so far as he was concerned the talk was ended.

Pikčiurnienė marched out and slammed the door so that the window rattled.

Šilbakis did not go to prison. He kept out of politics, went nowhere, and visited even Būblys rarely, only when some reason took him. He had stopped drinking long before and devoted himself only to his family, but his miserable farm had not been enough to keep them. He had got thoroughly sick of going to wealthy farmers and begging for work as though it were some favour. The endless taxes which only a big farm could carry were gradually ruining him. That was why he followed Būblys to the city. There, too, they did not live on white bread and cake, but at least the people seemed to understand and help each other more. He landed among workers. Outwardly everything seemed much the same as it had been. People toiled and lived their lives, usually in want. But if you looked more closely, it was plain that in the city some sort of movement was spreading for a better lot for all.

Šilbakis began to see everything with new eyes.

"If a man wasn't tied hand and foot with inborn prej-

udices," he burst out one day, "then with a brother-in-law like Būblys you could be something!"

But how was one to "be something"? What did the phrase mean to Šilbakis? He himself could hardly have said. No, he still understood little, very little of what was going on round about him.

"Why's there unemployment?" he pondered. "It's done on purpose! And it's such a rascally trick, you want to bash their faces in, those villains!

"That's what it is—workers are sacked so they won't think of striking! So the ones that are working will be so glad to have a job of any kind, they'll rack themselves to bits for a few *groschen*! That's how the bosses see it. And if in spite of it any of them do strike, for every one out there'll be ten others waiting to snap up the job!"

Būblys was soon busy. He went to meetings and spoke at them himself. He was not an eloquent speaker, but what he did say was sincere and convincing. And he never promised easy success.

"The fight will most certainly be a long one, we shall often stumble and often fall," he said. "But that doesn't matter. We must get up and go on again. The main thing is not to lose heart!"

Good man, Būblys, thought Šilbakis. If people are taken and put in prison for that, then it's more than child's play. But whether it'll all lead to anything better—that's another question!

One day when Šilbakis was saying something of the kind, Būblys almost lost his temper.

"Hasn't it got into your head yet, Merčius, why they hunt us and clap us into prison? It's because they're afraid of us! They can see the workers aren't such sheep as they once were. And they see the time's past when the workers let the Social-Democrats speak for them—those Social-Democrats who always looked up to the rich men and never opened their mouths without permission. Now

the workers are beginning to listen to us Communists. That's why the bosses are setting their dogs on us. And that, Merčius, is why we've got to be strong. We mustn't get weak-kneed, and then things will move."

Šilbakis made no answer.

2

Magdė Šilbakienė sat on the edge of the bed crying.

Her eldest daughter, Marta, sat on another bed, near the door. The younger children were asleep. Marta stared fixedly at the tiny lamp flickering dimly on the table. The brightly painted pendulum of the old clock on the wall swayed lazily but persistently back and forth, back and forth, ticking off minutes and hours. The clock wheezed, then gave eleven loud strokes. Outside a heavy silence brooded, as though the city were dead.

As long as daylight lasted, people had gathered in groups on the pavement or run to the windows. But it was a side street with little to see. Then in the evening the lights had suddenly gone out. The only tap in the house went dry. Policemen began marching up and down outside. That was when Magdė Šilbakienė gave way to depression.

Oh, why had they ever left Benagiai!

She put the children to bed without any supper, drew the curtains closely, locked the door and sat down on the bed.

Marta remembered that somewhere or other there ought to be a tiny lamp, brought from Benagiai. She found it, lighted it and put it on the table. It made things a little less frightening.

How could you help being afraid when times were so troubled and you never knew what might happen to you at any minute! It wasn't so long since there had been firing in various parts of the city, after the French left. Only three or four months.

How frightened Magdė Šilbakienė had been! How she had trembled! Because Šilbakis—crazy, he was!—refused to stop at home. “I’m off,” he said, “to watch those foreigners clearing out.”

“But why? What’s it all got to do with you? That’s politics,” cried Magdė angrily. “Why do you have to poke your nose in?”

When they saw dead men lying in pools of blood on the road however, it was not only Magdė who turned pale—Šilbakis himself looked white and sick.

He had recovered when Būblys came to see them a few days later. Not without pride he said, “Now we Lithuanians will be masters of our own country.”

“M’yes . . . masters! . . . Dunderhead! You ought to know by this time—horse-radish is no sweeter than plain radish!”

Būblys was right. Nothing got any better. The new government of Lithuania only issued edicts and threats: “State of emergency!” “Death penalty!”

“Don’t cry! After all, we don’t know anything yet,” Marta tried to comfort her mother. “Maybe everything’s quite all right, and you’re frightening yourself for nothing!”

“Be quiet!”

Magdė could say no more. She dissolved in tears.

In the ordinary way she never snapped at her children, but now she could not contain herself. Her whole being was concentrated on listening. She wanted to be the first to hear his footsteps. Of course there was little hope, it was eleven already. But—who could say? Listening tensely, she let her mind travel back over the years. And remembering all the past, began to feel very sorry for herself. Indeed, the life of Magdė Šilbakienė had been filled with care and trouble. Three children—when you’ve said that you’ve said everything. And only a year’s difference between them. One barely out of nappies—and

there was the next. The second still in the cradle, and a third came. The one not ready to leave it and the other demanding it. The one crying in this corner, the other in that. And then—illness. They had all had scarlet fever, measles and whooping cough. If one got ill, then they all went down—as though especially to plague her. You couldn't call a doctor or take them to one. And there was never any money.

How much had Merčius ever earned? So she had to leave the children to look after themselves and go out to work too.

After all—it's no joke to feed and clothe three children. You couldn't send them to school in rags. No, Magdė Šilbakienė's children had always been clean and neat. The teacher was for ever nagging at the children from poor families—for grubby hands, or black nails, or dirty ears, or no handkerchief. He'd always find something! And follow it up with a whole sermon in German. And a ruler on their hands, likely as not! But he could never find anything to pick on in Magdė Šilbakienė's children. And it was all thanks to her efforts. Because she lived only for her family. She would sit up at night, washing and mending. Sometimes she was so tired she dropped the needle or began turning the handle of the sewing-machine the wrong way. Merčius would half wake up and grumble drowsily, "Aren't you ever coming to bed?"

But she could not go to bed, she must finish the work for which she had had no time during the day.

Ah, no! You couldn't blame Merčius, she thought. Heaven forbid! And if he did get drunk now and then, well, he's a man, where's the man that doesn't drink? But he always thought of his wife and children. Often when he got paid he'd buy us something extra—a bit of stuff to make me a blouse, or frocks for the girls, or something for the boy. Even if it was only gingham. Where could he get the money for silk! It would be good if no woman

ever had a worse husband than him, or children a worse father! Of course he did go wenching once. Well, he was young! Nothing surprising in that, after all I'm no raging beauty! And there's plenty of hussies running about only trying to catch a man somehow. . . . He confessed it all and asked me to forgive him, and it never happened again. . . .

"Who's that, Mother?" Marta asked suddenly, breaking into her thoughts.

Magdė listened—maybe it really was—

"Who can it be? Dad never knocks loudly like that. . . . Listen. What if it's the police? Mother, don't let them in!"

But the neighbour went and opened the outer door.

"What's happening? Is everyone crazy in this town? Do the Šilbakises live here?"

"What ill wind's brought her?"

The door opened and Pikčiurnienė burst in.

"Here I am, the Lord be praised. Good-evening. I suppose I'm the last person you expected to see?" she said with a short laugh. "Let me sit down, at least. I'm not moving another step today. . . . But what's this? Why've you been crying, Magdė? What's happened?"

"Father went out this morning and he's not come back yet."

Marta did not like her aunt, in fact she could not stand her, but even Pikčiurnienė was a welcome sight just now—it had been very frightening, sitting there waiting.

"He'll turn up all right. Probably lying drunk somewhere. Wouldn't be the first time."

"Buše, don't talk like that, you don't understand," said Šilbakienė.

"Why mustn't I talk like that? Everyone knows what your Šilbakis is. Oh, of course you stick up for him! You'd put your hand in the fire and swear he can't do a thing wrong! But don't say I didn't warn you."

"Be quiet, I tell you! You don't know! People aren't al-

lowed out in the streets after nine, and he's not home. Do you understand what that means?"

"What's there to understand? Martial law or whatever it is. . . . Eh dear me, if you only knew all I've been through this evening! Better not ask!"

Nobody did ask. Magdè, wholly possessed by apprehension, had not moved from the bed. Marta was angry with her aunt for speaking so disparagingly of her father; she undressed, got into bed and turned to the wall.

So Pikčiurnienė launched on the tale herself.

The next morning she had to see the tax assessor.

"All these accursed taxes. . . . And you can't make Pikčiurna go anywhere, it's all left to me, I have to do everything. . . ."

So this afternoon she had set off for the city.

As a matter of fact, the taxes ought to have been paid the previous autumn. "But you know how muddled everything was then. Those *žemaitises* came along and I had to stick close to the house like a dog on a chain. Meikis was running about with tales of some sort of rebellion. Even our neighbour, that good-for-nothing Malonė, started talking big. Eh dear me, what a time! The assessor hasn't been after me lately, that's true, there's not a sound out of him, everyone's waiting for the new currency—lits or something. And I'm afraid they'll clap on such a tax in those lits that I'll never be able to pay it. I want to pay now, in marks. They're worth nothing anyway."

But passengers who got into the train on the way had been whispering about something. From words she caught here and there she had understood that the night before some workers—Communists, of course!—had overturned the monuments erected to Wilhelm I and Queen Luise. Raving mad, they must be! Overturning monuments! What harm were monuments doing?

"High time, too!" cried Marta from under the blanket; her patience had snapped.

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean it's high time to throw out that Prussian, that Queen Luise. D'you know what she stands for?"

"It was a memorial. . . . What could she stand for? Don't you start thinking that by overturning monuments here, you'll stop Germany getting to her feet again! She'll show you something yet!"

"You should have taken a better look at that Prussian. You'd have seen how she was staring out to the east! That means the *Drang nach Osten*! But now she's not going to get there!" said Marta hotly.

"And who's been teaching you all these politics? Būblys, I suppose! He's afraid that monument might get up and walk over to the east. Those comrades of his over there'd be in a bad way if it did! Maybe it was Būblys who threw it down? And maybe your father helped him? . . . But I haven't seen anything, I haven't said anything!"

Buše stopped short with a start as she saw Šilbakienė's face.

"What's that you said?" cried Magdė. "One more word and out you go! Coming along here without being asked, and then starting a lot of nasty hints!"

"Oh no, you can't put me out. Who'd throw a sister out in the middle of the night? Think what you're saying. Or do you want to get me taken to the police station?"

"It'd serve you right! But I won't dirty my hands with you."

"All right, don't let's quarrel. You haven't offered me any coffee; at least give me a glass of cold water. Show that much humanity!"

It was strange, but Pikčiurnienė's voice was softer. Magdė went to the kitchen for water, but returned with an empty mug.

"We haven't even any water. I didn't know it was going to be turned off, and didn't lay any in. There's no light either, as you see."

"Eh dear, and I'm dying of thirst! Well, it can't be helped, I'll just have to stand it. Oh, this town, this town! To take and turn everything off—just like that!... Oh yes, I was wanting to tell you... Well, we got to the city, and there it was all dark! And we hardly had time to get out of the station when suddenly—merciful Heaven!—a lot of men in uniform surrounded us! At first I thought they were Lithuanian soldiers. Well, I said to myself, here's the end of everything. I just prayed to God to save my life! But then I heard them talking German. I took a better look and found they were police. So I went up to one of them and asked him in German what it all meant. He said, '*Streik*,' and ordered us to follow him. And told us to come quietly and not make a fuss, and said that if we were with the police, nothing would happen to us. But we must be quiet and orderly, or else we'd find ourselves in jail. Merciful Heaven! My heart was in my boots! We went along with them, and all the time I was thinking to myself: now—where are they taking us? And then I looked round and found there weren't nearly as many of us as there had been, only just a few. I saw one slip into a gateway, and another into an alley. Well, I thought and thought, and slipped away, straight to you."

Pikčiurnienė laughed ingratiatingly, but she laughed alone.

"Of course, I ought to have taken the tram to Smeltė, and not troubled you. But since I was so close— Maybe you'd let me lie down somewhere, Magdė dear? As Merčius hasn't come, I could use his bed."

But Pikčiurnienė was not destined to lie down that night. There was another knock, the neighbour went out again, called through the door, "Who's that?" and received the answer: "Police!"

"My God, they've come to arrest you! What have I got myself into! They'll think I'm the same sort as you! What's going to happen? What's going to happen to me?"

Sure enough, the police had come to search the place.

"Perhaps you'd be so kind as to let me sit in your room?" Pikčiurnienė asked the landlord, whom the police had brought in as a witness.

"Nobody is allowed to leave here."

"But it's nothing to do with me. I only came this evening. . . . And the way things are here in the city,—I—"

"Your papers!"

"I've got everything here with me, here you are, everything! I'm Pikčiurnienė of Benagai. I've a big farm there. Don't think, please, that I've anything to do with people like these. . . ."

No, the police did not think so, but she was politely asked to remain as a witness, since she was there.

"With pleasure! Perhaps I can help you search?" Pikčiurnienė offered obligingly.

"No, just sit where you are."

"Very good. . . . I always knew it! That's why they moved to the city, to make trouble. I know that sort!"

The police searched long and thoroughly. Not only Marta, but the two smaller children had to get up while they searched the beds.

Day had broken when the police drew up their report. Pikčiurnienė signed it.

3

All sorts of things can happen in life, as poor Pikčiurnienė had to learn. Though she had never dreamt of misfortunes like the ones that came now.

"Lord of mercy, save and protect me!"

But here Pikčiurnienė made a very important discovery. As long as everything goes well with you, God helps you too. But if you're really in bad trouble, then it seems as though even God forgets you and leaves His servant to the mercy of a cruel fate. Had she not been afraid, she would have raised her fist and shaken it at God. But after

all, He had always been kind to her so far, she didn't want to quarrel with Him. She'd have to get out of her difficulties somehow or other by herself, nothing else to be done!

So there was Pikčiurnienė up to her neck in troubles in the city. Incidentally, she found another unpleasant phenomenon—a nasty, gnawing stomach-ache; it looked as though something was badly out of order. And all this made her ears ring and her eyes heavy so that she could not raise them to look anyone in the face.

It was a clear, fine day. Šilbakienė had stopped crying, but the look on her face boded nothing good. She made the beds, swept the floor, tidied the room and actually—of all things!—went round with a duster. Town ways! They'd even got time to fuss with things like that! She utterly ignored Pikčiurnienė, as though she did not exist.

Marta took a pair of buckets and went to fetch water. The other two children ran out, saying they were not coming back until they had found Father.

And Pikčiurnienė? Pikčiurnienė sighed, groaned, coughed—to show how bad she was feeling—and quietly prepared to go. And Magdė Šilbakienė, the bitch, didn't even try to stop her. She could at least have offered her breakfast. But no! Not a word! Call that a sister!

"Magdė dear, I'd like a wash," said Buše humbly.

"Plenty of water in the Dangė, go and wash there," Šilbakienė answered curtly. "You needn't wait for Marta, it's not you she's bringing water for."

Pikčiurnienė said nothing. Yes, she said nothing, because she could not look Magdė in the face. The strange ache which had begun in her stomach seemed to be spreading. Silently Buše tied her kerchief and crept out of the door without taking leave.

She would never go to the Šilbakises again. Never, whatever happened! She would go straight home today. The strike must end soon, surely. Anyhow, if she could

not get home today, she had friends in Smeltė, people she had known in the war.

When she got out into the street, her eyes became less heavy and the gnawing pain stopped. But Pikčiurnienė was hungry. This, of course, was nothing terrible. She would go into a café and get something to eat. She set off in search of one.

Had they all gone mad together?

The first café she saw was closed, so was the second, and so was the third. Even the blinds were down.

"When do the cafés open?" she asked a passer-by.

"They won't be opening today," was the answer.

"Why not?"

"Strike!"

Disappointed, Pikčiurnienė hurried to the assessor's office. But there too the door was shut. What was to be done now? Maybe the best thing really would be to go home? But she grudged the wasted fare. If she went home, she'd only have to come again—just riding to and fro. And the time lost? And the money? . . . She knocked again, but she might as well have knocked at a tomb. Silence. There was plenty of life in the street, however. People passing all the time, and what people! Not a single respectable man among them. All rough and shabby, uncouth, disgusting to look at. And they stared at her, at Pikčiurnienė, as though they'd like to tear her to bits. Yes, better go home.

Pikčiurnienė almost ran to the station for fear of missing the train.

Why was the booking-office closed so early? What time was it? Heavens—the clock had stopped. Wait a bit—wasn't that a railwayman lounging over there? Better ask him when the train would go.

"Tell me, friend—"

The man stopped, examined her from head to foot, and spat.

"I don't seem to remember ever having friends of your sort."

Pikčiurnienė looked about her—God above, give strength to my legs! There was a crowd of people coming on the platform—no, not people, working men one and all, the same sort of ragged scamps she had seen before.

But some respectable gentlemen appeared too, thank Heaven, and from them Pikčiurnienė learned that the railwaymen were on strike and there would be no train today or tomorrow, or maybe even the day after.

Pikčiurnienė was nearly weeping. She hurried to the tram stop. She would take the first tram to Smeltė—to the suburb where her friends lived.

That tram's a long time coming, she thought. How much longer do I have to stand here?

A passing man stopped, looked at Pikčiurnienė and asked what she was waiting for.

"The tram!"

Pikčiurnienė was perfectly dignified. But that impudent rascal—Heavens!—how he laughed!

"Maybe you've been here since yesterday evening, eh? Not tired of waiting yet? Better stretch your legs a bit, they must be swollen, after all this time. Or grown into the pavement. Do some walking. You'll have to wait a long time before you see any tram here. There's a strike on!"

Pikčiurnienė's feet actually were swollen. Would she really have to walk all the way to Smeltė? It was seven kilometres at least. And on an empty stomach, too. But there was nothing else for it.

So Pikčiurnienė set off for Smeltė. By the time she reached the place where her friends lived, her legs were buckling with weariness. After all, she was used to driving everywhere, even to her fields. And here she had to drag herself along on her own feet. And whose fault was it? Those workers! Those accursed workers! When would someone put them in their place? Easy to see that

the French were gone. Gone, and taken all their guns with them! And those *žemaitises*? They couldn't even keep order in their own house. Eh dear, if only some warship would come from England or America, the way it was before!

She knocked. The door opened, and she looked into the face of a stranger.

"Are the Harfenstellers at home?"

"They don't live here any more."

"What?!"

"They've gone to Germany. Not very long ago. Sold the house and went to live with their children."

The door closed. Silence, like the grave.

Pikčiurnienė sat down on the step, ready to weep. She was hungry. And her feet were blistered. And no way to turn. Maybe she should go back to Šilbakienė? All very well to hope for warships, but before they came you might be dead.

No, I'd sooner die here, in the street!

In the black curtain of despair, however, she did manage to find one "hole," as she put it afterwards—a "hole" where she was fed, for a good round sum, of course.

With renewed strength she went limping back to the city, and Heavens!—what she found there!

Pikčiurnienė never knew how she got into that human torrent sweeping into the centre, carrying along all in its path like chips on a flood. It bore her to Market Square, to the Simanas Dach Fountain.

What a mass of people! Could there really be so many workers in the city? Why, they could sweep right over those poor policemen if they liked! And the police evidently realized as much, for they slunk round corners. And who was that standing on the steps at the foot of the monument? No, it was a stranger, she had never seen him, but he was just the same as all the others... or maybe a little less ragged. Look at his face! And his eyes! And the way he was talking! Bold as brass!

Were there no warships in the world, after all?

When the occasion arose, Pikčiurnienė had plenty of courage. Nobody there could know that she was a landowner of Benagiai. She looked about her and saw there were quite a few other people of her own kind, drawn there by curiosity. She quietly edged forward, closer to the speaker. After all, it would be interesting to hear what he had to say.

She did not understand everything. And she could not always hear very clearly because of the crowd.

"When they joined us to Lithuania, it was not because—" (here she lost some words) "but because—The Entente wanted to separate the Klaipėda District from Germany because in Germany there was a big revolutionary movement which hasn't died down even now." (Pity they don't all die, those rascals—they're the ones who've been making the trouble! And I thought everything was quiet and orderly in Germany. A nice state of things!... But let's hear what else he's saying.) "The Klaipėda District was to be a spring-board from which the Entente could attack the land of Soviets from the rear. Why didn't they give this district back to Lithuania when—" (again Pikčiurnienė lost some words). "It was because there was Soviet power over two-thirds of Lithuania. And they wanted the Klaipėda District as a strong point for a war against—"

"That's right!" shouted someone beside Pikčiurnienė—so loudly that she was nearly deafened.

"Shut up!" someone else said angrily. "Don't interrupt!"

Again the speaker's voice became plain and audible.

"It was only Soviet Russia that prevented the imperialists of the Entente from making the Klaipėda District their military base in Eastern Europe. It was thanks to Soviet Russia that we were not handed over to the reactionaries in Poland, and that the French were withdrawn. Then the Entente decided—"

Why couldn't people keep quiet? Pikčiurnienė wanted to hear what the Entente had decided. Maybe they'd decided something good. If that man up there abused the Entente, then the Entente must be right. He said something more, something about the working people in the Klaipeda District being on guard, then he went back to the Polish reactionaries again.... Well, she had as much use for them as she had for Lithuania. But if—

"When the Lithuanian bourgeois government took over the Klaipeda District, it promised—" (How can it promise anything when it hasn't anything to give?) "But look at what's happening! The civil service is still run by the Kaiser's officials, the courts follow the Kaiser's laws, except that the penalties are harsher. The first thing the bourgeois government of Lithuania did was to proclaim martial law, and the death sentence for what they call 'breach of the peace.' Instead of—"

Pikčiurnienė could catch only fragments of phrases, for a forest of clenched fists rose menacingly and there were angry shouts: "Down with the bourgeoisie! Down with them!" As a matter of fact, Pikčiurnienė had already lost interest. All that stuff was for the workers, for the men who were on strike, God alone knew why.... But stop a minute, what was it they demanded?

"We demand the release of the workers that have been arrested!" (Aha, so they're being arrested!) "We demand an eight-hour day and higher wages. We demand a land reform; the estates must be divided up and given to the working peasants and farm-labourers...."

Stark, staring, raving mad! Pikčiurnienė seethed. They're not satisfied with stirring up the workers in the city, they've got to go sticking their noses into the villages too! What business is it of theirs?... But who are those? Thank Heaven, at last!

A weight seemed to roll off Pikčiurnienė.

A troop of Uhlans came galloping along Market Street,

straight at the crowd. Pikčiurnienė herself had to run to avoid being trampled or struck over the head with a whip. She got on to the pavement, turned to look, and saw that the police were making their way through to the workers clustered round the monument. The speaker had disappeared. A number of men were lying on the ground stunned by the heavy whips. Pikčiurnienė was so glad she wanted to shout "Hurrah!" But then she reflected that this would be paying too much honour to those *žemaites*. All the same, the Uhlans were splendid fellows. How they beat and lashed that scum!

Suddenly she saw Būblys on the very top step of the monument. He raised his hand.

"Comrades!" his voice rang out loud and clear. "Comrades! Keep calm! Although they attack us with arms, our will is strong and unshakable. We shall not relinquish our demands. If they arrest one, a hundred more will rise! If they arrest a hundred, a thousand will take their places! Our demands are just...."

Then the noise drowned out all but fragments.

"We shall not return to work until— Victory will be ours...."

He's the devil himself, that Būblys is, Pikčiurnienė raged. Why don't they grab him? Why does the government allow all this agitation? Why do they let him pour oil on a fire that's bad enough as it is.... Ah! They've got him!

The police were reaching up for Būblys. But even more hands reached up from the other side of the monument.

"Būblys! Down here! Down here!"

The next instant Būblys had disappeared in the crowd. It surrounded him on all sides and swallowed him. Pikčiurnienė spat in disgust.

Again there was a stir and movement; hands were raised high in the air, hands clenched in fists, and voices

rose, rose and swelled in a mighty song. Pikčiurnienė heard a woman's ringing voice quite close to her.

*Arise, ye starvelings from your slumbers;
Arise, ye criminals of want!*

She turned. The woman standing beside her was not yet old but already bent, with yellowish-pale face and sunken eyes. Those eyes were fixed on her, on Pikčiurnienė, and the raised fist seemed to threaten her. She had seen that woman somewhere before. But where?... Heavens! Was it that one? Sitting there on the threshold saying, "Mistress, I'm not a beggar..."

Pikčiurnienė screwed up her eyes, clapped her hands to her ears, turned and ran. She ran until she came to a quiet, deserted side street. Then she stopped and turned to see if anybody was pursuing. No, there was nobody. She took off her shoes, tied the laces, slung them over her shoulder, and set off for home on foot. Forty kilometres is no joke. But at least it was safer.

After all, I can sleep in the woods if necessary, she thought. Then a terrible idea struck her. Who knows what may be happening at home? Suppose—?

She hurried, she almost ran, but she could not escape the feeling of being followed by that woman with the yellow face, sunken eyes and raised fist.

*Arise, ye starvelings from your slumbers;
Arise, ye criminals of want!*

4

Silbakis nearly fell headlong when he was pushed into the cell.

"Here's another!" someone said.

The iron door clanged to behind him. There was a thud as though someone had pushed it to with a boot, then a key turned. And that was that.

"Damn!" growled Šilbakis. He felt that now he could curse all he pleased.

"Well, brother, what are you here for?" asked a voice from the darkness.

Šilbakis tried to sort out all that had happened to him. The sunshine had been very bright; shining right in his face. So he saw nothing until he was right there, at that damned place. And then he saw it. Of course he was amazed, and of course he stopped and stared. Who wouldn't? Martial law, nobody allowed to stick their noses out after nine, patrols everywhere so that you were afraid even to look out of the window for fear of getting your head bashed in—and here, someone had gone and thrown down those two great slabs of monuments! Wilhelm I and that cursed Luise! Wilhelm was lying decently with his nose to the ground as behoves an old man who'll soon be underneath it. But that Luise! On her back with her legs in the air! You could die of laughing! And of course he couldn't keep his silly tongue quiet and addressed her with:

"Now, who's put you down in such an unseemly position, poor thing? And where's your *Drang nach Osten*?"

And there were those curs, those spies, as though they'd jumped out of the ground.

"What was that you said?"

"Me? I didn't say anything. No one to talk to."

"Why are you standing here?"

"And why shouldn't I? It's not forbidden, is it? Maybe I'm waiting for a girl?" Šilbakis hoped to joke himself out of what he felt to be a nasty mess.

"By the overturned monument?"

"It wasn't overturned when we fixed the place."

"Oho! And who d'you think threw it over?"

"Who? Same sort of people as you and me. But they must have had a pretty powerful crane to do a job like that."

A whistle shrilled. The thud of footsteps. Three or four policemen—and here he was behind bars. And what have I done?—he thought. Nothing at all!

“Why are you here? What for?”

“For staring.”

“Staring?”

“Is there anywhere here to sit down? I can’t see a thing, I’m still blinded from the sunshine. . . . And—well—I wasn’t helped in very tenderly!”

“Here, here you are, sit down on the bed, mate! They don’t supply arm-chairs in this place.”

Šilbakis fumbled till he felt something—a wooden board with bedding, it seemed to be. Somebody was already sitting on it.

“Actually, sitting on beds is forbidden,” said his neighbour. “But as there are a lot of us and they didn’t think it necessary to issue chairs, we’ve given ourselves permission.”

“Have you been here long?” Šilbakis asked.

“All come at different times, brother.”

“But what are you here for?” He broke off short. Maybe—Heaven forbid!—there were murderers or thieves among them. Better not ask questions. But one was already answering.

“The same thing as you!”

The next morning Šilbakis was taken to be questioned. He returned, gritting his teeth.

“The bastards! The dirty swine! Of all the idiotic things to cook up!”

“Well, come on, out with it—what did they say?”

“Huh! Asked me whether I threw down the monument! Idiots! I’m not the daredevil sort, but I just opened my mouth and told them, ‘I’m not in the habit of fighting stones! If I want to fight anything, it won’t be them!’”

“Did they believe you?”

"Try and make them believe anything! I said to them, 'That monument to Luise or that Prussian or whatever she's called stood right under the windows of the police station! What were the police doing when it was being thrown down? It wasn't done by mice gnawing under it. It wasn't done by ghosts. It was done by men. And they couldn't do it with their bare hands, either. They needed some sort of tackle. Maybe you had a finger in it yourselves? So you could blame workers and put them in prison? Like me?' You should have seen how mad they got! I thought they were going to start beating me up!"

"Did they?"

"No, they didn't. But the way they yelled—I wonder it didn't lift the roof off! They said I'd rot in prison till I confessed. We'll see about that!"

Šilbakis was not sure whether it was the fourth day or the fifth when they heard a strange noise outside the prison. It sounded as though the sea had flooded the city. Then there were separate voices. It was impossible to hear through the walls what they were saying. But inside there was shouting, and banging doors and running feet in the corridors. Then keys rattled, the iron grating fell, the door opened and a number of men whom Šilbakis, of course, did not know, appeared in the opening. One of them was holding a list.

"Vilius Zardininkas!"

"Here!"

"Come out. . . . Walter Sangwald!"

"Here!"

"You too. . . . Martinas Šilbakis!"

So Šilbakis found himself outside the prison once more. Again the sunshine blinded him. And what a crowd! People embraced and kissed each other, wives wept to see their husbands again. . . . Just like women,

thought Šilbakis. But in his heart of hearts he envied those husbands. Nobody was there to meet him, or hug and kiss him. So he set off for home at a run, without turning. He could hear the crowd move off somewhere, and start up with some song. When he had to pass the Luise monument he shut his eyes so that he would not be tempted to stop and laugh again.

At home he found Magdė busy with the children. When she saw him she burst into tears.

"Come on now, come on, wife, nothing to snuffle about," he said. "I'm back again, safe and sound. Better let me get washed and have something to eat, if there's anything left."

While he was eating, the Būblyses looked in.

"Well, Merčius, so you've had a taste of prison skilly, eh?" laughed Būblys.

"Yes, I've had some. And what for! Because of that Prussian I happened to pass by and stopped to take a look—why was she lying there on the ground, I thought. Idiots! Do they think a man who'd thrown it down would stand there waiting to be arrested?"

"Well, anyway, you've got to know them a bit better," and Būblys grinned.

"You know, Jurgis, when Klaipėda was given back to Lithuania, I thought everything was going to be different. But instead of that, they... well, how can I put it? Instead of understanding people, treating folks decently, they seem to do nothing but think up dirty tricks. Somebody pushes the monument down, and instead of being glad that there isn't even a memory left of that *Drang nach Osten*, they take folks and shove 'em into prison! Eh, scum always rises to the top, that's a true saying. There'll be a lot more floating up yet that we've never even dreamed of, eh?"

Būblys looked at him and smiled.

Old age began to knock at Buše Pikčiurnienė's door with no uncertain hand. So far it had not found the latch, but it might at any moment. And then? Old age would lay her on her bed, fasten her down there, and—No, it was too soon to think about death yet; but handing over the management of the farm to her son—of that she could think seriously, especially as he himself was already eager to be on his own feet. That was only natural. The years were passing, Jokūbėlis* had been out of knickers a long time now. Of course—it was far from pleasant to think of soon having to hand over the reins to another. It seemed only yesterday that Buše Pikčiurnienė had taken them into her hands, and now—leave it all, give it up—and go away! Go? Oh no! No question of that yet! But time did not stand still. Take Pikčiurna, for instance, creaking and groaning all the time. Though he always had groaned, for that matter—an ache here and a pain there. Only she, Buše, had never had time to groan, and had never done so. But now she began to catch herself: "Oh, my back! Oh, my hands! Something wrong inside me. If only it's not ... Heaven forbid! What is it the Holy Script says?—'Put your house in order, for tomorrow you may—' No, no! But just to be sure...."

If only Jurgis had not been killed in the war! She would have handed over to him gladly, without the slightest hesitation. He had always been a dutiful son. But Jokūbėlis! The contrariness of the boy! Just think of it—to go and fall in love with Ilžė Malonikė!

It all happened this way.

Jokūbas junior had not felt any very great interest in the Malonė family, but he knew his mother was always

* Jokūbėlis is a diminutive of Jokūbas, used for children.—*Tr.*

at daggers drawn with them, and it was enough to say the word "*malone*"* without even meaning the neighbours for her to fly into a rage.

This young man decided to amuse himself by teasing his mother. For a beginning he started greeting the Malonès when he saw them. At first they did not reply—probably thought: like mother, like son, and so on. But young Jokūbas continued until at last their hearts softened and they answered. Then Jokūbas began going into the Malonè yard now and then. When the gate was locked, he would lean over it and if nobody appeared, pass the time talking to the dog—who wagged a condescending tail and yawned to show he found it all very boring.

Buše saw what her son was up to, and her choler rose.

"What bee's got into your bonnet now, dunderhead? Want to keep company with those? Those paupers?! Those beggars?! Don't you dare! Or I'll give you what for!"

But young Jokūbas did not care what his mother would do. He knew her through and through, all he wanted was to annoy her. Nothing else. Nothing else, of course. . . . Oh, how dull; how deadly dull life was! Especially for Jokūbas. He did not work—there were farm-hands for that. Study? But he'd learned everything already—reading, writing, arithmetic—he had even learned the whole multiplication table off by heart at school. What more did he need?

Had there been a theatre or cinema near by he would have gone every evening, although he knew there wasn't always a good show. By "a good show" he meant adventures, crime, wild animals and that sort of thing. If worst came to worst, he could sit through a love-story

* *Malone*—kindness, compassion.

too; the only pity was that he could not make practical use of what he learned from the cinema.

His mother had once thought of buying a house in the city, but then for some reason she had got frightened and dropped the idea. Now that would have been just the thing! He could have gone there and had a good time, all the pleasure he wanted! But as it was, the only amusement for young Jokūbas was the village inn. He was no drunkard, you could not say that of him. But a man has to have a good spree now and then! A couple of times he even got into a fight—how else can you show that you're right and the other fellow's wrong?

Of course when he came home drunk or after a fight, his mother was angry and rated him well. But she did not get into as great a rage as he wanted. It was the same kind of rating, the same kind of words he had heard again and again, he knew them almost by heart and was sick and tired of them.

So now, to annoy his mother, he began talking to the Malonės.

When Pikčiurnienė decided it was time for him to get married and advised him to court Stimbrikė of Žiaukeliai, or even better Benagykė of Benagiai, he felt the time had come to give his dear mother a real shock.

Ilzė Malonikė's cheeks flushed red as the apples he tossed to her over the fence, as a first advance.

At first he could not have said that Malonikė attracted him more than the other girls; in fact, they all looked pretty much alike to him. But what was a man to do when his mother kept dinning into his ears morning, noon and night that he ought to get married, get married, get married!

Then he began to notice that Malonikė was not nearly as silly as most of the girls. Benagykė couldn't hold a candle to her. The only snag was—Malonikė had no money. But after all, did that matter so very much? He

was the only heir, the whole farm was his. True, Ilzé had one more drawback—her family was nothing to boast about. She had an uncle sweeping streets in the city, and another relative who had only one arm and limped, and still another who was so poor she actually went about begging—unless she had died. But even that did not scare young Jokūbas. On the contrary, he was tickled by the thought of how all this would infuriate his dear mother.

"Mummy, Jokūbas is making eyes at me," Ilzé told her mother, half proud, half annoyed.

"Now then, now then, daughter!" Her mother shook a finger at her. "Are you sure you haven't been making eyes at him yourself?"

It sounded as though she were pleased but did not want to show it.

"But what if he wants me to marry him?"

"Anything bad about that, dearie?"

"I'd like to have a handsome husband! Jokūbas is so lumpish!"

"You can find plenty of handsome ones, but they won't be so rich. Just think what a lady you'd be!" The mother could contain herself no longer. "You could bathe in milk, you'd never have to put your hands in cold water, just walk about carrying a bunch of keys! Heavens, Heavens above! But no—things like that don't happen to us! It's just foolishness!"

The daughter became thoughtful. Soon afterwards, seeing Jokūbas in the orchard gathering apples or pears, she gave a cry and registered a fine mixture of excitement and confusion, thereby letting it be plainly seen that she regarded him as a possible sweetheart.

Maloné felt there was something in the wind.

"Not setting your cap at that good-for-nothing, are you? Just try it, that's all," he growled and shook a warning fist.

"What call have you to say he's a good-for-nothing?" his wife took up arms in the young man's defence. "If he does get drunk sometimes, it's on his own money. Good-for-nothing, indeed!"

Malonienė called up all her cunning to her aid. If Jokūbas really did want to marry Ilžė—it was difficult to believe it, but suppose he did—just think what Pikčiurnienė would say! So Malonienė decided to act. One day when she saw Jokūbas lounging about his yard, hands in his pockets, she called him.

He started. He literally ran to the fence. For this was the first time any of the Malonė family had spoken to him first.

"Did you call me?"

"Uh-uh! Why don't you ever drop in and see us? Ilžė often says—"

Young Pikčiurna jumped.

"What? But I didn't know. . . I thought—"

"Oh, rubbish! Look in this evening."

"But—can't I come now?"

(What a gawk!)

"No, no! In the evening!"

After a little time had passed Malonienė started buzzing like a mosquito. If he intended to marry—and she'd always thought he was serious—then it was about time he did it! Because Ilžė, poor child— Oh dear, what a misfortune! What a scandal! What a terrible thing! And there the Meikises had sent matchmakers and Ilžė had turned them away. And now? Was he going to cast her off to be a laughing-stock? Did he really want everyone to call him a seducer? Had he no sense of honour? Or did he want to spend the whole of his life tied to his mother's apron-strings until she made him like . . . like— After all, everyone knew Pikčiurnienė! Malonienė had trusted him blindly, as though he were her own son! She had allowed him to come and see Ilžė, even

to go into her room! There was nothing wrong about that in itself, of course, but—

“Look how Ilžė’s crying, poor child!”

Jokūbas at once showed that his intentions were perfectly honourable, and he was no worse than young Meikis.

“Why are you always nagging me about Benagykė?” he growled at his mother. “I don’t want that fat pudding!”

“Jokūbėlis! Are you an absolute fool, or what? Think what you’re saying! Come to your senses!” Pikčiurnienė implored. “Remember—the Benagyses of Benagiai and us—we’re the richest farmers in the village, even the whole district. Why, Benagys comes from the nobility! His family were the first to settle here. The village is named after them! The Benagyses have been here for centuries, just as the Pikčiurnas will be. Even Perkūnikė of Milkarpiai married into their family. And Milkarpiai’s a really big estate. Think of the honour it would be to be related to a family like that! Why, Benagys was witness for me once, and when I was thanking him he said—even then he said, ‘I’ve got growing daughters. Maybe we’ll be related some day.’ Jokūbas, just think how splendid it would be! Jokūbas, what if I send—well, say Šnekutienė? She used to be quite a good matchmaker. If I had a daughter-in-law from such a fine, respected, really suitable family, then I could die in peace.”

“But I don’t want—” her son began.

“No, of course, it’s early for me to talk of dying yet! I shan’t die for a long time! I was only just saying—”

“And what I say is—I don’t want that Benagykė! I’ve chosen a girl for myself.”

“Who?”

“I’ve got one, I tell you... The betrothal’s next week.”

"But who is it?" Pikčiurnienė was literally gaping. "Ilžė."

"Ilžė Ma— Ma— Ma—"

Pikčiurnienė could not even pronounce the word, it was so hateful, so horrible. . . .

Then hell broke loose in the house, with quarrels and abuse day and night.

"I shan't let you have the farm! I'll do the same as my father did! I'd sooner have strangers living here!"

"Very well," her son answered. "Then I'll go away with Malonikė. Only remember, my dear mother—"

Oh, the things he said to his mother! He threatened to expose all her dirty dealings.

To say such things to his mother!

And he added that she, Pikčiurnienė, had been dragging neighbours to court all her life, now he'd take her to court in her turn, and put her in the dock.

"You're not going to spoil my life as you've spoiled others," he said. "I'm a man! And I know what I'm doing! And if I've given my word, I keep it!"

"Has that witch given him a potion and turned his wits?" thought Pikčiurnienė. To have an estate and marry a pauper?! That never was and never will be!

One night he came home thoroughly drunk. Probably to give himself courage. He went into his mother's room, nudged her side to waken her, and demanded, "Well, my dear mother, when are you going to give your consent to my marrying Ilžė Malonikė?"

"Are you starting all that again? Merciful Father! No peace even at night! Gone clean crazy! . . . What d'you want, you villain?"

"I'm asking you—do you give your consent? Speak up!"

"I'm saying nothing, and I shan't."

"Tomorrow's our betrothal. . . . What? What was that you said? . . . Nothing? All right, then!"

"I've said enough already! You know my mind. And I don't change it! I've never yet changed my mind and I'm not going to start now. Mark that! And now—not another word!"

"All right, my dearest mother!" (Yes, he called her "dearest mother," but the irony of it!) "If you don't let Ilžė come here, I shan't live here either! You hear that?"

"I've said a long time ago it's time for you to get out of this house and beg your bread. Sling a sack on your back, take your Malonikė by the hand and go your ways. You'll soon see how far she'll go with you if you're a beggar! You'll see how much she loves you then!"

"But you won't live here either," her son announced, ignoring her closing words. "I'll burn the roof over your head! D'you get that? Or not? Speak up! It's my last word. Nothing to say?... Still nothing? Where are my matches? I've got lamp oil ready and there's plenty of straw..."

Pikčiurnienė was too much frightened to stir or even to speak.

Staggering, her son made for the door.

Somehow or other Pikčiurnienė collected her wits, jumped out of bed and ran after him barefoot. And he—oh merciful Heaven!—he stood there and stood there in the yard, and then ... went through the wicket gate leading to the Malonė!

"What's going to happen, dear Lord God, what's going to happen? Lord, counsel him! And counsel me too, what I'm to do!"

She ran to old Pikčiurna who was sound asleep and shook him awake.

"Sleeping like a log! And that accursed Jokūbas nearly burning the house down! And d'you know why? Because of that Malonikė! My God, because of Malonikė!"

... Ilžė Malonikė did enter the house, calm and self-possessed. Being the only daughter, she had the whole of her father's farm as her dowry.

6

The Bergeshoch carriage was the first to roll into the yard. After it came all the other conveyances.

Ilžė Malonikė absolutely refused to have the cart with the bridesmaids and best man lead the way. She didn't care a snap for custom. She would have things as she wanted—and she did.

When Ilžė stepped down from the carriage, her patent-leather shoes twinkled even more triumphantly than its panels. As though forgetful of everything, the bride stood for a moment on the step looking over the yard. Her lips tightened, her eyes narrowed, and something new came into her face. She glanced towards the farm buildings and caught the voices of the labourers coming from them. Then she looked at the huge haymow and the poultry-house.

Mine! All mine! She felt something tickling her throat.

The guests were gathered near the door, awaiting the arrival of the bridal couple. Among them were some of the bride's relations who were—alas!—anything but a credit to Ilžė. But if they were nothing to boast of, the same could be said of the bridegroom's relatives, as well. And there weren't so many of these poor relations, thank God. One of them—also called Malonė, a cousin of her father's, or something like that—had never even been in Benagiai before. But her father had to go and invite him, and he came, too—just as though she couldn't possibly get married without his presence.

I'll just have to show them I've never had anything to do with them before and I'm not starting now, she

thought. Otherwise they'll be hanging round all the time. To have a rich relation like me—it's an honour for them!

The guests began moving towards the house in pairs. But again Ilžė Malonikė, now Pikčiurnienė, treated customs with contempt. She wanted to enter first. Let them whisper! Let them say what they wanted—she was going to do things the way *she* wanted!

"Well, come along, Jokūbas!"

On the threshold sat a beggar-woman known as Ilžėlė. She was related to Malonė, although very distantly. Ilžė's mother had explained the exact degree of relationship a number of times, but Ilžė had not been sufficiently interested to remember it. Ilžėlė came in when she happened to be passing, spent the night behind the stove and left before Ilžė was awake. She had never been to the Pikčiurna farm. But now here she was, large as life! And not just for alms, no, she was waiting for the bride to come home from church! When Ilžė and Jokūbas drove up, the beggar-woman fell on her knees right by the door and started her usual song about The Glorious Land Beyond the Jordan.

Ilžė Pikčiurnienė stopped, and everyone expected to hear her graciously accept the old woman's congratulations. But Ilžė had different ideas.

I'll have to put a stop to this sort of thing, she thought. I can't have beggars wherever I look. It'll make it difficult to take our proper place—with the Benagysės and Meikisės....

"So you've come, have you?" was her acknowledgement of Ilžėlė's congratulations. "Why did you have to pick today? My mother-in-law won't like you hanging round!"

Ilžė stood for a moment, letting her eyes pass over the grey-headed old woman with haughty contempt.

"I just wanted to take a look at you," the beggar-

woman answered loudly and almost arrogantly. "I thought you might be a bit better than Buše Pikčiurnienė. You come of poor folks yourself, you ought to feel for a poor woman like me. You can't have forgotten so soon what it's like to go hungry!"

But Ilžė Pikčiurnienė had already moved away with her guests. Her mother, who had been in the hall and had heard everything, went out to the old woman.

"You oughtn't to have said that, Ilželė! After all, it's her wedding-day, remember.... Go along now, you've had a good meal, and look how much I've put in your bag, it'll last you a long time. Go along! Can't you see how old Pikčiurnienė's glaring? She didn't say anything today—after all, it's the wedding, but if it were any other day...."

"Old Pikčiurnienė's ill looks don't frighten me, I can see her day's over! Thank you for the food. I'm going. Oh, just one thing—my stick's split, can't you get me another? With all the men about the place here—"

"Ilželė, don't be foolish. Who's going to start looking for a stick just now? Go to our place, maybe Jonis has one."

"Nay, Malonienė," Ilželė answered. "Let Malonė keep his stick. He'll need it yet to correct his daughter. He hasn't used it enough!"

Ilželė rose and shook out her skirt—with the same gesture as Ilžė Pikčiurnienė. But this time it looked as though Ilželė were shaking the Pikčiurna dust off her rags. She wove her way to the gate and as she had taken a drink or two, to bolster up her courage, she quite forgot she was supposed to know only the one song about The Glorious Land Beyond the Jordan, and struck up another, a most improper song about a "naked wench." Outside the gate she called back a few more biting words about Ilžė, laughed and disappeared.

Meanwhile, the old Pikčiurnas, the Šnekutises and a cousin of Malonienė's called Kibelka arrived at the other gate. They had gone for a drive, but returned on seeing the bridal party coming back from the church.

For this day—of course, only for this one day—Buše Pikčiurnienė had handed over the reins of domestic management to Malonienė. In the first place Buše really was tired with all the recent worry and work. However little she liked this marriage, it must be celebrated in due style. The only son! And secondly, it would have been too great an honour for that bitch Malonikė to have Buše Pikčiurnienė herself waiting on her. Buše had even seriously considered leaving the house altogether that day. Let them celebrate without her. But she thought better of it. She would sit in the place of honour, as befitted her. And she would let everybody see how kind she was, condescending to accept Malonikė. Not only today, but always, she would look down superciliously on Ilžė. And Ilžė must raise her eyes to Buše with the humblest respect—if she ventured to raise them at all.

Nobody, nobody could know the struggle all this had cost Pikčiurnienė, nobody had seen how she wept or heard her lamentations. She had bitten holes in her pillow, soaked it with her tears. And all because of that Malonienė. All because of her. If it hadn't been for that old vixen, it would never have entered Jokūbas' head.

Now she wept no more, she lamented no more, but the struggle was not over, oh no! We'll see who comes out on top! I've my portion for life! And let that Ilžė just try to keep anything back, even so much as a single rag!... Buše Pikčiurnienė would know how to get it from her! She knew all the ins and outs of things, she needed nobody's advice.

And the Malonė land? That had been Ilžė's dowry—she was the only heir. Now it all belonged to the Pik-

čiurnas. At last that land had come into Pikčiurnienė's possession! And Buše intended to waste no time. There was a little space free by the poultry-house where a hut could be built—one room and a kitchen. Quite enough for them! Malonienė could have a window on the side where her house and yard used to be, if she liked. She could amuse herself looking out at the hens and ducks and the empty ground....

But nobody could ever put Pikčiurnienė out of her big, light rooms! The locks on the doors, the handles on the windows were all of bronze, shining like gold. The kitchen had tiled walls and floor, and copper rods and hooks. Her mirrors, her china, her silver! Buše Pikčiurnienė had lost nothing, nothing! Her savings-bank book. She could add more to it yet! But no, maybe better not. Better be careful, better start another account, a new one, in the big bank. Yes, in the Bank of Emission....

There's something in it when people say I ought to have set Jokūbelis up on a farm of his own. Well, he's got what he wanted. Let him set to work now with that wife of his! Let him work the way I've worked! He needn't think he's going to get everything handed to him on a silver platter while he lies in his bed. Oh no! I shan't ask for all the money at once. In instalments.... Things haven't worked out quite as I wanted, of course, but I've got my way in one thing at least. That Malonė house is going to disappear. I wonder what Malonienė'll look like when she has to crawl into her new home by the poultry-house! And if they don't want to work on my estate, then they'll just have to starve! I'll teach them to catch a landowner for their slut of a daughter!

"Hurry up, Buše," cried Šnektienė, breaking into her sister's sweet dreams. "They've arrived! It won't look well if they have to wait for us."

"Us! Who d'you think's going to wait for you?" laughed Buše nastily.

"Oh, of course, they can start without me all right, I know that I don't matter. But you and Jokūbas... What if they begin without the parents?"

"We'll see about that. I'll give them parents."

She said no more and they walked into the yard.

Pikčiurnienė took her husband's hand and entered the big room. The guests were already seated at table. And it appeared that there was no room left beside the bride. Pikčiurnienė stopped. For a moment she thought of making a scene, but decided against it. She quickly picked up two free chairs from the other end of the table and placed them beside her son.

"Move up a little," she said politely to the guests, and obviously embarrassed, they made room. It really was an awkward moment. No place had been left at table for the parents. And for Pikčiurnienė of all people!

But it all passed off smoothly. Pikčiurnienė ate and drank, talking affably to the guests.

The Malonės were not at the table. But what did they matter? They weren't important, they could find themselves a place anywhere!

At last that Malonienė was busy, she was fixing up something out in the corridor for the less important guests. She stopped the Šnekutises and Kibelka at the door.

"Where've you been all this time? Everything's got cold. And now—in the big room all the tables are full, there's not an inch where you can squeeze in."

Malonienė reddened awkwardly, her voice shook, while her hands fidgeted with her apron and her kerchief. She did not know where to put herself for shame. And Malonė stood at the door smoking his pipe and grinning sourly, breaking out into a shrill falsetto laugh every now and then.

"Ilžė said—"

Malonienė did not want to betray her daughter, but neither did she want to take the blame herself.

"Ilžė said if there wasn't enough space—and there really isn't any in the big room. . . . And anyway," Malonienė interrupted herself, half in jest, half seriously, "let the fat jowls be all together, and we'll go into the small room by the kitchen. Marė and I've laid the table there. And I managed to get some of the cake from Ilžė . . . but what am I saying? I don't have to manage it, of course, we're guests just like anyone else."

Malonienė's words poured out—too many of them, and in increasing confusion.

"Well, come along."

"Yes, dearie, it makes no difference, does it?" Šneikutienė consoled her ingratiatingly. "There are plenty of places for us in the small room. So long as we don't lose our place in Heaven! . . . Well, Mr. Kibelka, are you coming?"

But the respectful "Mr." seemed to have no effect on Kibelka. He stood as though turned to stone, looking very strangely at Malonienė. And still stranger was the way Malonė fidgeted about and snickered—more and more. Malonienė felt the sweat pouring down.

Ilžė Pikčiurnienė's gay voice rang out from the main room.

"You can surely take just a little wine, Your Reverence! After all, you give us wine yourself—even in church!"

"Let's go in," said Malonienė more loudly, trying to drown her daughter's voice.

Šneutis and Šneikutienė went into the room by the kitchen where Malonienė's relations were sitting, very uncomfortably crowded. They looked as though they were waiting for somebody. Marė Šneikutikė was busy at the table. Her mother whispered in her

ear and nodded significantly towards the corridor where Kibelka was still standing. Marė did not seem to understand, she asked again and again, "What? What?" but did not go out.

"Wait a minute, Malonienė, who's keeping us out here?" asked Kibelka.

"There's no more room in there, Krizas, there really isn't!"

"Well, all right then, if there's no room I'm going home."

"But Krizas—! You mustn't take offence like that!" the bride's mother implored. "Young people don't think what they're doing! They'll realize it one of these days and then they'll be ashamed, they'll be coming and asking your pardon, you'll see."

"No, nobody'll come to ask my pardon, and I certainly shan't be waiting for it. But—"

"What's all this? It's not the market-place!" Ilžė's sharp voice broke in. She was standing in the doorway and had evidently heard everything. Her eyes were cold, the eyes of a stranger. "Why are you making all this fuss, Kibelka? Want people to get down on their knees and beg you to sit down?"

"I don't need anyone to beg me, but I'm not going to be treated like a beggar either. You must excuse me, my dear Ilžė—I forgot for the moment that I hadn't come to relations, but to the Pikčiurnas. A house with a reputation! And I rather think you're going to increase that reputation! Well, good-bye, Mrs. Pikčiurnienė! I hope you'll be happy!"

"But Mr. Kibelka!" Šnektutienė broke in. "Look, your relations and Malonė's relations are all here. And they're all very respectable people!"

"I'm not saying anything about them."

"But Krizas," Malonienė pleaded, almost crying, "I've got so few relations of my own, don't hurt me like

this! My daughter's just a silly girl. If I'd known before—"

She had no chance to finish; the sharp voice of her daughter cut her short.

"My dear mother, I'd advise you to be a bit more careful how you talk about people who—! If anyone wants to go, they can! And welcome! I'm not keeping you. You surely don't think, Kibelka, that I'm going to give you a place beside the pastor?"

Kibelka was already in the yard when young Pikčiurna appeared.

"Why don't you come in?" he asked, suspecting nothing. "Why, mother-in-law, why are you crying? What's the matter? Father-in-law, please take our guests in." He opened the door wide.

"Shut that door!" snapped Ilžė. "If I say there's no more room, then there isn't! What are you thinking of? I've had a table laid for them in the small room, let them go there! It's the same food, everything just the same. But Kibelka wants to sit with the pastor and the Meikises and the Benagyses! Thinks a bit too much of himself!"

"But why—? I don't understand."

"If you don't understand, then don't interfere."

"Eh, Krizas, Krizas," said Malonė. "You can go, all of you can go, you've all got a place to go to. But me? Come to my house, before they take that away from me. . . . Very soon—"

Malonė's lips trembled.

"It's a nice daughter you've brought up!" Kibelka shook his head.

"She saw too much of Buše Pikčiurnienė, friend, that's who she learned it from! She's climbed on her wagon and she's singing her tune. . . . Come along with me, while I've still got a corner I can call my own."

"Whether you like it or not—I'm sorry for you."

"D'you think I'm not sorry for myself? Aye.... Brought up a daughter, and because of her I'm left without stick or stone. My house won't be standing much longer. Pikčiurnienė's got the better of me at last. I'm in the web."

7

"Now what can you make of those women!" Jonis Malonė spat. He was still waiting for the stork to visit Ilžė Pikčiurnienė.

"Look there, Mother," he said to his wife. "Why's it Ilžė's ... so long?"

"What do you want of Ilžė?"

Malonienė knew well enough what he wanted. For she had deceived him. She had fooled him. Fooled him completely. He had fought bitterly against his family having anything to do with the Pikčiurnas. He had even thought of selling the farm and turning his daughter out.

"Let her go and work, the hussy, and not mess around with the Pikčiurnas. Thinks she's going to be a fine lady, does she?"

Oh, there was no end to the things he said. Once he even threatened to give his daughter a face more like a patched old boot than a china doll.

But then he bit his lip. He felt his words were impious abuse of beauty which God Himself had created, so he contented himself by reminding her and her mother that if he sold his farm, Jokūbas Pikčiurna wouldn't want anything to do with "our beauty."

He was mistaken in this. Young Pikčiurna had not looked so far ahead. In the first place, there was his driving wish to cross his mother, and in the second, when the situation became serious and Malonienė really laid siege to him, it was too late to retreat.

But the farm belonged equally to Malonė and his

wife. And she simply did not go to the court-house when the inventory of property was to be drawn up. So nothing came of the sale.

Then later, his weeping wife told him that Ilžė and Jokūbas had "sinned," and now there was no way out unless Ilžė drowned herself, because in a few months—So Malonė surrendered. Now Ilžė Malonikė had become Pikčiurnienė, she was young Pikčiurnienė, she was a rich landowner. That was the end of it.

But it was not quite the end. There was still Buše Pikčiurnienė. Yes, Buše was still there, very much so. She had the "estate" tightly clutched in her own hands. She still occupied the whole of the big house, relegating the young couple to Jokūbelis' room in the attic. Buše was still mistress in every sense of the word. Ilžė could not even find anything to do in the kitchen. The store-room key, and all the others too, hung at Buše's belt. Ilžė could weed the garden if she liked, or water the calves, or work in the laundry.

But Ilžė did not like. She hadn't married into an estate to work like a servant. Buše might think she'd caught a simpleton. Well, she'd made a mistake!

Ilžė did not venture to say anything to the old woman, however. Her time had not yet come. According to the agreement, the farm would pass to Jokūbas junior only in the winter. First there would be the reaping and threshing. Then Buše would measure out with her own hands the portion which was hers, take it to town with her own horses and sell it. Only then, round about Christmas or New Year, would she move over into her part of the house, which she had the right to use as long as she lived.

But much could happen before that.

One day Buše sent for all the labourers and led them to the poultry-house. A pile of left-over building material lay behind it—stones, bricks, beams and some

planks that were still quite good. All this had to be sorted and stacked, and a place cleared for the new house. Neither her son nor her daughter-in-law, of course, would see to this job. All right, they could let it alone. So much the better, in fact—the work would go faster under her.

Yes, Buše wanted it to go fast, she was avidly eager to see the look on Malonienė's face when she had to leave her home and move in here, by the poultry-house. . . . We'll see how pleased you are then!

The building had to be done with all possible speed. There is always a short lull in farm work between sowing and haymaking—Buše saw that full use was made of it to finish the "new house."

Old Pikčiurna was let into the secret on condition that he kept a close mouth. And his mouth did remain closed. He was an old man, he wanted peace. He relinquished to his son even the remnants of authority which he still had the right to retain.

"It's your turn to work now, son! I've done my part. My arms ache something awful—must be the rheumatics. And I can't be out when the sun's too strong, it makes my head swim. And when I have to argue with the labourers, my heart goes all queer! And my legs are stiff, I can hardly walk. God knows whether I'll hold out till the autumn. . . ."

While the son "worked"—of course, under his mother's supervision—the father smoked his pipe in the sunshine and dozed.

"Counting the sparrows," hissed Buše angrily.

Ilžė spent her time strolling carefree about the garden or visiting her old home, and the hut beside the poultry-house rose rapidly. Ilžė was not particularly interested in it. Let them build what they liked. It was she who would be the mistress of it all, just the same.

Jokūbas, however, asked his mother in some surprise:

"What's that going to be?"

She smiled mysteriously.

"Can't you guess?"

"We've got all we need. You're building up the whole yard. Although I suppose it's not the yard really, it's outside the gate."

"And that's the way it ought to be, Jokūbēlis. You wait, you'll be glad yourself."

"But why waste all that money? Or is it to be for more labourers?"

"If it's not needed for anything else, it'll do for that."

The carpenters finished their work just as it was time to start haymaking. The hut had two windows on the Malonė side, one for the living-room, one for the kitchen. Buše had even allowed a small porch to be made, so that it would not look too bare. Then an old, sagging door was hung, the small windows put in, and the Malonės' new dwelling was ready.

That evening Pikčiurnienė sent for her son and his wife. She was reclining on the sofa, drinking coffee and eating cakes. She had become less stingy recently and often bought dainties for herself. When the young couple entered she invited them to sit down and offered them coffee and cakes in an affectionate manner very unusual for her.

"Well, children," she said, a smile fixed on her face, "it seems that my labours are completed. Time flies. A few months more and it will be autumn. And at Christmas, as you know— Well, what I wanted to say was—"

The smile disappeared.

"I would like to see you both doing a bit more work. Jokūbas does work, that's true—as much as is fitting for the future master. But you, Ilžė—! When I went to my husband's house I never thought of resting. I set to work at once. I never rested day or night. Dozed a bit with my head on a pile of hay, and back to work

again. Everything you see here—I have garnered it all. But what do you do? Sleep till midday and then stroll about with your hands hanging idle! Well? Haven't you anything to say?"

"But you don't give me any work."

"Give you work? A right-minded woman, the future mistress, doesn't wait for somebody to give her work, she finds it herself. Nobody ever gave me work. Open your eyes and look for it. The garden's all weeds, the potatoes in the cellar are sprouting. D'you expect me to go down and sort them? Is that my job? Why didn't you go haymaking if you couldn't find anything to do? A young woman like you—haymaking ought to be a pleasure! But what do you do? Saunter from one house to the other. D'you think you'll be able to keep on that way when I'm gone? Is it your mother putting you up to this way of acting? Shall I have to take you both in hand? D'you think you're going to gain anything by deliberately crossing me? Remember the agreement? If you don't, you'd better read it again. Jokūbas has it in his cupboard. I can—you know what I can do. I consented to let you marry my son, but I thought you'd be properly grateful, and show it. Have I been mistaken?"

"I'm not a servant, I'm your son's wife."

"Oh, so that's your tune, is it? You'd better not start getting above yourself. You might very well have found yourself the wife of a labourer or maybe a beggar..."

"Now Mother," interrupted Jokūbas, "are you starting all that over again?"

"And you keep quiet too, Jokūbėlis! I'm not afraid of you. For the present you're in my hands. If you do as I say, you won't regret it. I'm telling you for your own good. You too, Ilžė. And there's one more thing I've got to say to you. You've come into our family though you didn't deserve it. Well, all right, then. But

now you have to obey me! Understand that? Obey! Well! . . . I've built a hut for your parents."

Pikčiurnienė held her breath, waiting to see the effect. But so far as Ilžė was concerned, there seemed to be none. She sat quite still, her head lowered, twisting a corner of the table-cloth. She never flickered an eyelid. Jokūbas, however, gaped in surprise.

"Surely you guessed why I was building that house, Jokūbas?"

"No, I never thought of it. Nobody'd ever spoken of such a thing."

"You ought to know by this time, I don't do much talking—I act!"

"I thought we were only going to take their land, but the house—"

"But I understood it all," said Ilžė quietly.

"Why didn't you tell me?" asked Jokūbas.

"I thought you'd planned it together."

"Well, now your parents will live in a new house," Pikčiurnienė continued. "They've never lived in a house like that in their lives before."

"In one like that—no!" Ilžė answered very significantly. But nothing could be read on her face, it was cold and composed. "I'm quite pleased," she added.

"What are you pleased about? That I've built a house for your parents?"

"But, Mother, why was it needed? We've got so much room in our house here!" the son interrupted again.

"What? What was that you said? In *my* house?"

"Well then—there's the Pluta house. . . ."

"Jokūbas, I'd never agree to my parents living in the Pluta house," Ilžė cut him short.

"My dear Ilžė, you're not being asked. Your parents will live where I say. And there'll be no argument or discussion about it, either! Tomorrow morning early you can go and help them move into the new house. It's

all ready, so I shall have nothing more to do with it all. Except to send the men over to pull down that rotting old hut of theirs! It's time to put things in order, high time."

"Very well," Ilžė answered.

"And tell your parents, if they don't want to live where I say, they'd better get off my land. And it's not only the land belongs to me—you know that yourself—it's all the property on it, animate and inanimate. They'll take nothing away with them, not a rag. You can go now. And see you're up in good time tomorrow. Good-night."

Buše Pikčiurnienė had no particular desire to have the Malonės under her nose all the time. But she could not let them out of her sight either. They'd wanted to marry into an estate, had they? Well, they'd got what they asked for!

8

Ilžė was an obedient daughter-in-law. Early in the morning she hurried over to her father and told him that today his house was to be pulled down. Everything had to be finished by the autumn—the house and buildings removed, the clay cleared away, the beams stacked and trees dug up. Then there would have to be a new fence, and the pond must be cleaned out, widened and deepened; the ducks and geese were getting big, they needed water.

"And look, Father, what a nice little cottage we've built you!"

"You? You've built it? Ilžė? You do this to your own father?... Traitor! Judas!"

Ilžė made no reply. She took her weeping mother to look at the new cottage.

Yes, Malonienė was weeping. It was very hard for

her to lose her home. But that was not the worst. She knew that she was falling into the clutches of Buše Pikčiurnienė.

"Perhaps, Ilžė dear, you could put it off for a little while? Maybe—"

"No, Mother, I don't want it put off. Go and roll up the bedding and get everything ready: I'll bring the men in a little while to carry your things over."

Malonienė went back into her house and stopped, frightened. Her husband was pacing up and down the little room like a wild animal—no, more like a thrashed dog locked in the kennel—dashing first to one window, then the other, peering out, watching apprehensively for something or somebody. He pushed his wife into the room, made her sit down, told her not to move, bolted the door and resumed his uneasy tramp from window to window.

"Not a thing do they touch!" he declared. "Over my dead body that Pikčiurnienė comes in here! She's not going to pull my house down! She's not going to touch it! As long as I'm alive I'm going to have a corner of my own. I won't set foot on her stinking estate. Mark my words, Mother—not a foot do I set on it!"

"But Father, listen a moment," Malonienė tried to soothe him. "Don't get so excited! You don't know, maybe it really will be better for us? Quieten down a bit, think it over..."

"I'm not thinking anything over! Let Pikčiurnienė push me into some corner of hers? That bitch who's been trying to ruin us as long as she's been here?"

"But, Father, it's our Ilžė who's the mistress there now. If you'd only come and just take a look at that cottage. We'll be living quite separately."

"Ilžė's not the mistress there, it's Buše you'll be dependent on for your bread. And it'll be the bread of charity. You'll stand there waiting for the crumbs that

fall from the rich man's table—and having to cringe for them, too, and say thank you . . . if they do fall. That's what you brought on yourself, Mother, luring in this waster! How many months is it now? Where's that child that was going to be born any minute? Why did you lie to me? Why did you have to push your head into Pikčiurnienė's noose? You wanted to spite her, but why didn't you stop to think what she might have up her sleeve for you?"

There was nothing left for Malonienė but to weep. And she wept most bitterly. For it was all true, every word. But it couldn't be helped now. What was done couldn't be undone. Good-bye, little home where she had known much trouble, but also much happiness! Malonė had loved her, she had loved Malonė, she loved him now. She could not conceive of life without him. Together they had toiled over their poor fields and put the strength of their bodies into them, together they had carried that load of poverty, and because they were together it had not seemed so heavy. Yes, they had been happy. What they sowed, they had reaped. Sometimes less, sometimes more. But the family had always been warm with love and thoughts that were shared. And their daughter—how proud they had been of her! Pretty as a picture! Sometimes she was naughty, of course—what child isn't? And how they had laughed when she declared that she would marry very early, and not just anybody, but a rich man with an estate! And then she would never have to feed the pigs, and she would eat cakes every day and always wear fine shoes. . . . Happy, childish dreams, they had thought with a smile. Let her have them, life'll teach her soon enough. And then when young Pikčiurna began courting Ilžė—well, after all, Malonienė was a mother, and what mother doesn't want her child to be rich and happy! Because of that she had quarrelled with her husband. It had been

their first quarrel. And for the first time in her life she had lied to him.

"They're coming, those devils!"

"But Jonis, those are the labourers! Where are you going? Wait..."

But Jonis was already out in the yard, running towards the labourers, shaking his fists. Malonienė ran out too, and hurried as fast as she could to the Pikčiurnas, to Ilžė.

"Ilžė, dear Ilžė, daughter, why are you in such a hurry to pull down the house?" the mother sobbed. "Go and stop them, tell them to stop! Wait a little, only a little! Have pity! Your father's ill... Let the house stand as long as he's alive. You know how hard it is for him. All morning I've thought he was going crazy, he couldn't keep still, he kept tramping up and down, up and down... I'm afraid he might do himself a mischief. Just think, try to understand him—he was born here, lived here all his life. And you were born here too. Aren't you sorry yourself to do it? When Father dies, do as you like, I'll agree to anything if I'm still alive... I mean, I know I shall be quite comfortable with you. It's only—"

Ilžė would have cut out her tongue rather than admit that it was all being done on Buše's orders. No she had to show her parents that she was the mistress, and all orders came from her.

"Why, Mother, are you trying to make me want Father to die?" she asked angrily.

"Of course not! Aren't you a Christian? And our only child? I'm sure you've never thought of such a thing. You ought to be ashamed even to say it!"

"I ought to be ashamed? *I?* It's you who ought to be ashamed! Think of what you've always been! You know yourselves! And now I want to raise you up, put you beside me! I'm pulling down that old rickety hut so

that you'll forget the beggarly past. Father will never have to do another stroke of work to the end of his life! He can live like a gentleman! He's *my father!*" She pronounced the final words most haughtily—let her mother understand the importance and dignity of the relationship. "And you the same. You'll have everything provided. Not a thing to worry about. Sleep all you like, get up when you like. Have your breakfast brought to you in bed. Only wait till autumn! Have patience just for that little time! And then— Mother dear, if Father's so foolish, at least you be sensible. Calm him down, get him quiet! He'll get used to it! I don't want to find you here one day with the house fallen down about your ears!"

"But the house isn't as bad as all that, Ilžė! It's quite strong, it'll last our time, and when our time comes to die—"

"Starting off about dying again? You know very well, Mother, I don't like to be crossed. And I don't want to sit waiting for you to die. Pikčiurnienė—that's another matter!" She stopped, feeling she was giving herself away, and quickly changed the subject. "I've given orders to the men to help you settle in," she said with impressive emphasis on the first three words.

"But Ilžė, your father—"

"I don't want to hear another word!" Ilžė cut her mother short and went out, banging the door. Now indeed Malonienė began to despair. What could she do, Heavens, what could she do now? Go to her son-in-law? But what use was that blockhead?

No, I'll go to Buše, she thought. I'll beg her, plead with her! Bad as she is, she's a human being!

So Malonienė ran to old Pikčiurnienė.

"Buše, make my daughter think again! Dear God in Heaven!"

"And what is it she's doing?"

"Can't we go on living just another year or two in our home?"

"No, you can't! Your hour has come, Malonienė, mother of a landowner! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Malonienė felt she had jumped from the frying-pan into the fire. She hurried out, slamming the door behind her.

Ilžė too returned to her parents' home after taking a stroll in the garden. She intended to give her father a good scolding and show him her mind was made up. She would tell him that immediately after the wedding she had begun thinking how she could move her parents and where, so as to pull down the old house. It was nothing to boast of, standing there! Buše Pikčiurnienė would point it out to everybody who came. "That's where she was born, that lovely wife my son's chosen! Acted like a fool, my son!" But if the house was gone, there wouldn't be anything to jeer at. The fields didn't matter, after all, one field looks just like another. But that house!... Pikčiurnienė was right, it wasn't much of a dowry for a girl entering such a family. So she had to be clever....

The men had already started pulling down the shed. One corner sagged so that the roof nearly touched the ground. It seemed to stoop like an old man.

But why had they stopped, why were they bare-headed? Was this the time to stand about, with work waiting to be done? And why did her mother suddenly fall on her knees and bow her head? What was it? Could something terrible—?

Ilžė came closer, and the labourers made way for her.

"Why have you stopped? What's happened?"

"Look for yourself."

The men put on their caps. They had turned to Ilžė now and evidently felt it would be showing her too much respect to speak to her bare-headed. They looked

curiously at the new "mistress." What expression would her haughty face wear now?

Ilžė went closer and saw. She saw her father, Jonis Malonė, lying on the ground. He did not move. And a piece of rope was still round his neck.

"Go for a doctor! Quick!"

Nobody moved. One of the men answered in a loud, jeering voice:

"He's gone to find his own doctor. He doesn't need any of our help. You were in a mighty big hurry, Ilžė, packing him off to the next world."

Ilžė's face was deathly white. For a moment it seemed as though she would fall down on her father's body and weep. . . .

The mother raised her eyes to her stunned daughter, eyes of frenzy and agonized grief. Then she jumped up, raised her hands with the fingers crooked as though she would strangle Ilžė.

"Monster! Murderess! It's you that's killed your father!" And Malonienė collapsed.

So they never used the cottage which Buše Pikčiurnienė had prepared for them so carefully.

The widow had to be locked up in the old house until her husband was buried. She knew nobody, not even Ilžė, and refused to recognize her as her daughter.

"No! We've never had a daughter. Why do you say I've a daughter? When did I ever have a daughter? Why do you think such things about me? I've always been a respectable girl, and I still am! And I'm so young yet! Of course, Jonis. . . . Jonis will come back from Germany and then he'll marry me. But where's Mother, where's my mother?

"She's run away, out of the house, my mother has. . . . What shall I do, they're beating her! He's gone to look

for her, and they've both gone, why don't they come back? If only she hasn't drowned herself! She ought to be home by now! Because she always comes home, always!... I want something to eat. I'm so terribly hungry. But I haven't anything. If only Buše hasn't caught her.... No, no, Marè, it doesn't matter what you give me, I shan't eat it. I'd sooner starve. I saw Buše put a whole handful of arsenic into it, I saw her with my own eyes! A whole handful! A whole handful, the nasty wretch!"

"Do try to eat a little of this!" Marè Šnekutikè begged her—Marè had been asked to look after the sick woman. "Your daughter made it all herself, boiled and baked everything. Look, I'm eating it, and nothing happens to me!"

"No, no! You can't fool me like that! I'm not so silly.... Yes, I know, Buše says she's my daughter. I know all about it! She does it so she can get in here and kill me! Don't I know? All she wants is for me to die! But I'm not going to die! She'll choke with her own bile first—look how yellow she is!"

"Malonienè, Buše's never been in here. She's terribly frightened now, she's locked herself in and hardly ever comes out. And your daughter loves you, she cries all the time because you're ill."

"Why do you tell me all these lies, you shameless girl? Has Buše bribed you to get rid of me? I know she'll not dare come to me herself. She knows I'd sweep her out with a dirty broom! Oh, I know, I know Buše calls herself Ilžè now. But she's Buše, Buše, the same Buše she always was...."

But the old house had to be pulled down, and in the end people got tired of looking after Malonienè. So at last she was taken to the asylum.

That autumn the hens clucked in a big new yard, and the geese and ducks swam contentedly in the fine, clean,

deep pond. They felt just as much at home there as Ilžė did in her husband's house. They had no longing for the broad fields outside the high wire fence.

But the window out of which Malonienė was to have admired the hens and geese remained empty, nobody looked out of it. Gradually it became dark with dust and dirt. Then one day a cock that had had the worst of a fight with a young goose flew up and broke the pane. And so it remained, nobody took any notice of it.

Buše Pikčiurnienė was at first actually surprised at the swiftness and completeness of the change which had come about. But then she felt quite pleased with her daughter-in-law. All her life long she, Buše, had been unable to settle the hash of the Malonės, but their own daughter had done it within a few hours.

She often came out now to look at the place where the Malonė house had once stood. But it was not the poultry that attracted her eyes. She gazed over the even fields with their winter crops. All the land which had once belonged to Malonė was sown to rye. It came up fine and thick. A pity Malonienė could not see how fields should be looked after, how they should be fertilized so as to give a real crop.

9

It was only after two years that the stork came to Ilžė Pikčiurnienė, bringing a son, a sturdy, healthy young Pikčiurna.

For two years Ilžė's position had been anything but secure. If her husband had died in that time, she would have been left homeless. Her parents' house was pulled down and the land merged with the Pikčiurnas' so completely that not a sign remained of the old boundaries.

And Buše Pikčiurnienė—perhaps of deliberate intent

—kept the hut she had built for Ilžė's parents standing empty.

True, everything was done properly, all the due forms were observed—all but one. Buše Pikčiurnienė refused point-blank to include her daughter-in-law in the official list of landowners.

"She's my son's wife, that's enough!"

Ilžė was no fool, she knew what that meant. But she held her tongue and waited. Time was on her side. . . . Buše Pikčiurnienė had moved to the part of the house allotted to her, but still dominated the whole of it. She made herself felt everywhere. It was with her that her son discussed everything, instead of with his wife. Buše wanted it that way. It mattered little to him—all he wanted was peace and quiet in the house.

All right, let her do as she likes, thought Ilžė. I can bide my time.

Now her time had come, with the birth of her son.

That day Buše Pikčiurnienė would not congratulate her daughter-in-law or even look at her grandson.

She must be grinding her teeth, thought the young mother with malicious glee. And she's got good reason! You're finished, Buše!

Young Pikčiurna had never properly understood what went on between the two women. Nor was he particularly interested. He possessed a handsome wife whom he was not ashamed to take to town or show off anywhere. True, Ilžė did not seem completely satisfied. There was something more she wanted, but she did not say exactly what it was, and young Pikčiurna did not trouble his head about it.

But now Ilžė was thoroughly content. With the birth of a son she had struck such deep roots in the farm that even Buše's strong hands would never be able to tear them out.

"Ilžė dear, Mother wants to see the baby," said young

Pikčiurna the next day, when he dropped in for a moment to admire his heir. "Can she come?"

"No!" answered Ilžė.

"What?" Pikčiurna was startled. "But why not? Do you feel bad?"

"Yes, I feel bad."

"But Mother may be angry. There'll be trouble. You know what she is...."

"She can do as she likes. I'm not afraid of her."

Jokūbas went out; there was a sound of whispering outside the door.

"What? Is she crazy? No, no...."

Then a door closed, and silence fell.

Ilžė lay, a triumphant smile on her face.

A little later the door opened a crack and old Pikčiurna crept cautiously through. He halted on the threshold and stood, rubbing his upper lip with his forefinger.

"Come in, come over here, Father, so you can take a real look at the young gentleman. How d'you like him?"

The old man came up and looked at the infant lying in the white cradle, covered with a white blanket.

"Aye, he's a fine boy! And just like you! The very image!" the old man cried ingratiatingly, even before he saw the baby's face. "Well, I'll be going along, they say you're still weak."

"No, Father, I feel splendid! Sit down and talk. How are you going on? I haven't seen you for ages. You never come and see us. Maybe Buše doesn't let you?"

"What's Buše got to do with it?... Though maybe I'd better be going, or she will be getting mad."

At this moment young Pikčiurna came in in a state of perplexity.

"What shall we call the boy?" he asked and turned to the old man. "What do you say, Father? I was thinking, Ilžė, of giving him your father's name. Let him be Jonis! Or even better—Johann...."

"No!" said Ilžė Pikčiurnienė.

"What, then? Jokūbas? Like Father and me? All right, I know Mother'll want him to be Jokūbas or Jurgis."

The young father was ready to rub his hands with delight when he saw Ilžė smiling as though she agreed.

"No," answered Ilžė.

"I don't understand...."

"No, he won't be called Jokūbas."

"But why?"

"I chose a name for him long ago."

"What have you chosen?"

"Horstadolf."

"Ilžė!"

"What, don't you like it? Never mind—I like it, and that's what it'll be!"

"But Ilžė, think! We're Lithuanians! There's no other child in Benagiai with a name like that! Not one!"

"That's just it! I don't want a name you hear in every hut! And when my son grows up he can choose himself a surname too, whatever he wants. I can't stand your name. When I was little I always used to think—why are they called Pikčiurna? And then I understood it was just what you all were—cross-grained, malicious...."

Old Pikčiurna slipped out. A moment ago Ilžė had talked to him so kindly, and now look what she was saying! The old man was disappointed. But he would not tell anybody. What good would it do?

"Are you mad?" cried young Pikčiurna, quite forgetting that the new mother must not be upset. "Change his name, indeed! I shall have a word to say to that! I'm his father!" Then, suddenly deflated: "Very well, let him be Horstadolf. But what shall I say in the *Saulia** detachment? I've just joined...."

* A Lithuanian nationalist organization of a paramilitary nature.

"That's exactly why I chose the name. Just now you're sitting on the fence. Make up to the Lithuanians all you want, but don't forget to keep in with the Germans too, with their *Einheitsfront*.*"

"But why should I do that?"

"Because we don't know yet who'll come out on top."

"But I've nothing to do with politics."

"Jokūbas, I want to rise in the world. And I'm going to. And I'm not going to let you be a nobody either! But we'll talk about all that later on. Now, about the christening. . . ."

Yes, the christening! Ilžė wanted to invite not only the Meikises and Benagyses, but people from some really big estate—perhaps Mr. and Mrs. Ogilvys. Most genteel people! And then—the refreshments would have to be fitting. Better get a *chef* in from the city. They could kill a calf and a year-old pig, and as for the poultry—well, she'd settle that later on. . . .

"But do we really need to have it so grand, dear?" Pikčiurna remonstrated. "Think what Mother'll say!"

"A-a-ah—your mother? You know, I'd like to show your mother how things ought to be done in a house like this. We celebrated our wedding in a beggarly way. Your mother was watching every coin and shaking in her shoes lest she spend an extra *groschen*. If we hadn't baked cakes and—"

"That'll do, Ilžė!" Pikčiurna cut her short peremptorily. He was stung by the reference to the beggarly wedding. "You'd better keep quiet about that! It wasn't I who brought beggars. You know well enough who my guests were. Who were you proud to see there? Who was it you fussed over and made eyes at? Who did you sit and joke with all the evening? The pastor! And who

* A German nationalist organization.

invited him? And who invited the teacher Ginteris? And the sergeant-major of the gendarmes with his wife? Who brought those?"

"A teacher and a gendarme! What an honour!" cried Ilžė ironically.

"And what about you? You hid your guests away in some corner or other, but all the same everybody knew the whole lot were beggars. You drove one or two of them out, but there were still a dozen or so left, getting in the way of my guests. Did I invite the Šilbakises or Būblyses?"

"You might have invited them, but neither Šilbakis nor Būblys would have come."

"And quite right too! They would have known they'd be out of place here."

"Oh, that's not the reason ... but never mind. I'll make up the invitation list myself, and then we'll see."

Ilžė Pikčiurnienė celebrated the christening exactly as she wished.

Šnekutienė was in church and saw it all.

The next time she was in town she went to Magdė Šilbakienė and poured out the news.

"Eh, Magdė, if you only knew! It must be the Day of Judgement coming! Heavens! The airs Ilžė puts on! Just think. ... The baby in a blue silk robe, and another of white gauze on top, right down to the ground. Like a cloud! A real cloud! And the pillow all silk and lace, blue and white! And all the ribbons! And violets! Now where on earth did she get violets at this time of year? Benagys' wife was in a wonderful dress, the kind they used to wear—all silk, it kept rustling and rustling. And her daughter, you should have seen how smart she was! The very latest style! All sequins, like silver. Young Meikis was in a ... a dress-coat, I suppose it

was, with a great long tail at the back! Like a swallow! And the other guests—just think, they'd got Germans too! And the way those Germans were dressed, I simply can't describe it. Everything fine and genteel, the German way! Three days they celebrated! Oh yes, but they didn't invite any of us! Well, of course, you live here in town, but they could have asked me, couldn't they? But not they! They didn't even ask my Marè to help in the kitchen! And it was Marè who looked after her mother when she was ill. Stupid, it was, for Marè to go there. Now think for yourself—all night long that poor Malonienè kept running up and down the room and Marè after her. Marè got worn right out, she could hardly stand on her feet when they took the poor woman to hospital at last. And what did she get for it all? Not even a 'thank you'!

"Yes, I was talking about the christening. I could have carried the baby up to the font, just as well. Of course I can't dress so fine as Mrs. Benagys, and my Šne-kutis' good clothes are all threadbare. Aye, homespun doesn't rub shoulders with silk. . . . But at least they could have asked us to the feast. Even the next day—to help eat up what was left. But no! And they say Buše was sitting away somewhere in a corner too. Whether she was sulking or whether Ilžè arranged it that way, I don't know. And the old man was hanging about the yard and the hall, standing by one door and then by the other, hoping someone would notice him and ask him inside. But Ilžè said right out, 'Yours is being taken to your room, Father.' Now what do you think of that? No room at the table for old Pikčiurna! She ought to be humbly grateful to him, and not only him, Buše too! But she's as proud and puffed up as a turkey-cock! And who's got all that wealth together for her?

"M'yes. . . . What else did I want to say? They tell me Pikčiurna went to his room and got drunk! Went out

and bought it with his own money, and fuddled himself! And then he started singing at the top of his voice, for Ilžė to hear! They say she didn't know where to look, first she was pale and then she was red. Aye, folks get to know everything. . . . And they say Buše ran off to the neighbours so as not to see and hear it all!

"What's that—you want to know about Malonienė? Oh, there's no hope for her. They say she was getting better. But then Ilžė had to go there to visit her! And as soon as Malonienė saw Ilžė, she began raving all over again! Awful, it was! She kept shouting, 'Hasn't your bile choked you yet?' So there you are, Magdė—you see what happens when a person only thinks of wealth and getting-up in the world! Because it was she, that Malonienė, who got Jokūbas all tangled up so he couldn't get out, like a fly in a web. And Malonė too—think of his going and hanging himself! But it wasn't his fault, she tangled him up too! Only he cut himself free his own way, poor man!

"Oh, that Ilžė, that Ilžė! As soon as the child was born she showed what she was. Buše came to me the other day. Eh, and you should have seen the way she cried! I said to her, 'But Buše,' I said, 'what's the matter with you? Haven't you got everything anyone could want? What more do you need?' But she just went on crying. 'You don't understand, how can you?' she said. 'You haven't got a big house! And you haven't a hussy like that mincing about in front of you all the time!' Well, that's true, of course! But what I say is—it serves Buše right. Pride turned her head! And I've been thinking, Magdė—d'you know what's the difference between Buše and Ilžė? Buše's always raging and storming, she's spent her whole life quarrelling with her family and the neighbours and the labourers; but no one's ever heard Ilžė raise her voice or curse, you'd think she doesn't know how. She says what she wants,

short and clear—and everyone obeys her. Just one word, and it's all settled! I don't know how long that will last, but that's the way it is so far.

"... Yes, have you heard? But how could you, living here? They say Ilžė means to buy a house in town, and put it in her son's name. Now, where have they found all that money? And young Pikčiurna's going in for politics. What side he's going to take nobody knows so far. Some say he goes with Meikis, and Meikis is in some kind of Lithuanian society or party or something—I don't know anything much about these things. And others say he's with Benagys all the time. And Benagys is in that German front.... I can't help laughing. Maybe it's a deputy in parliament he's wanting to be? They'll break their necks one of these days, mark my words!"

19

Šnekutienė did not exaggerate. Young Pikčiurna was sick of following the labourers round to see they were working properly. Why should he spend his life trailing about after ploughmen—in this Godforsaken hole Benagiai? Especially as he had the chance to become an important man, a big man. And what a chance! Meikis had literally grabbed him, and clung on. Ilžė Pikčiurnienė would get her heart's desire.

"I tell you, *Mensch*,—stop running after that Benagys crowd," Meikis warned Jokūbas. "Those Germans'll just pull you along like a bullock on a rope. But you won't get a thing out of them. You listen to me! You're a Lithuanian, your mother's a Lithuanian and so's your father. And you're all very highly respected. You can be the leading man not only in Benagiai but in the whole Memelland.* You can make a name in Kaunas,

* Memelland—German name for the Klaipėda District.

even. *Mensch*, if you knew what the governor said to me! 'Can't you find me a man,' he said, 'a man like—' Well, one like you, to put it in a nutshell. He wants someone to put into the Diet at the next elections. '*Selbstverständlich*,' I told him, 'I know a man who's very highly respected, a big landowner.' 'That's just what I want!' he said. 'We haven't had any Lithuanian landowners of our party in the Diet yet.' 'That's quite true,' I said. 'Landowners usually run over to those German *Grossagrariern*. But my Mr. Pikčiurna won't do that.' So you see where you are, Jokūbas. You'll be the first candidate on our list. The next—I'm not quite sure who the next'll be, and I'll be the third."

Pikčiurna's eyes were opened. Yes, Ilžė had been right when she said he ought to seize his opportunity! Here it was, that opportunity! Soon there would be elections to a new Diet. Very well! Fight for the interests of the Lithuanian landowners!

When an election meeting was called in Benagiai, he offered to be the first speaker.

"I'll tell them what it's all about! Oh, I know what to say!"

But the trouble was the writing—to write in Lithuanian, and with Latin characters, was horribly difficult. They looked absurd, those little hooks under the Gothic letters. Well, all right, he could manage the hooks—but the other signs, they got him down. And Meikis said he must certainly write out his speech, because it might be printed in the paper.

At the thought of people reading his speech in print, Pikčiurna's chest swelled like a barrel.

In the end Mr. Pikčiurna went to Mr. Meikis to ask whether his son, who was at secondary school, would come and write out the speech. He would dictate it himself, of course. He only needed it written in a plain, clear handwriting.

Young Ansys, the youngest of the family, was a modest boy. He left his father to answer for him.

"*Ja, selbstverständlich!* Go along, Ansys, and show what you can do! And don't disgrace yourself! The speech of our future deputy to the Diet must be *extra fein!* And be careful, don't make mistakes and don't put any German words in! They won't do at all this time. You're in the fourth form at school, you know how words are spelled. And when all's said and done—"

"Oh, I know all that," Pikčiurna hastened to defend himself. "It's only—all this new-fangled language—"

"Since we've a young man getting such fine schooling, we may as well make use of him! After all, it'll be a bit of preparation for his own political career. He's not going to laze about or dig manure with the farm-hands when he finishes school. Well, son—"

Ansys sweated for three days, and the speech was written *extra fein*. Then Pikčiurna spent another three days learning it off by heart, and incidentally learning to read at the same time. Twice he went to Ansys to ask the meaning of some word.

It would all have been much easier in German, of course. He could have written it out himself and read what was written without any difficulty. But this Lithuanian—it didn't seem properly clear, somehow. All these strange words. . . . Maybe it would have been better if he'd stopped with Benagys after all? If only there weren't so many people round about, all giving him advice! His mother said one thing, Ilžė another. And Benagys stuck his nose in the air and snorted and hinted and laughed jeeringly. You never knew what he was thinking. But after all, Meikis had visited the president himself! And not only in Kaunas—on his estate, too. At a reception. Even had tea with him, folks said. Meikis had a decoration already, and he was good friends with the governor, too. The governor even em-

braced him and said if there were more like him, things would be very different in the Klaipeda District. It certainly was pleasant to be on friendly terms with such an important man. And that decoration? If Meikis had one, then he, Pikčiurna, ought to get two at least. But, of course, he had to begin to do something first. Perhaps he really would get into the Diet. If he did, then it would all be plain sailing. But—again that Diet! Very few from the Association of Lithuanian Farmers ever got in. They would have had more, of course, if the farm-labourers had voted the right way. But catch them doing that! Scum!

Pikčiurna learned his speech off by heart, and prepared for the meeting.

It was held as planned. Nothing happened to hinder it. All the big farmers were there. A few of the poorer ones came too, of course, but that did not matter. The only thing was—that group over there in the corner, those woodcutters. . . .

Pikčiurna's heart beat fast when he took his seat on the platform with Meikis and the chairman of the Farmers' Association. Evidently there were no other speakers. Nobody had come from the city, although speakers had been promised. Perhaps they were simply late? Not very likely. Pikčiurna would have to pull his socks up, make a longer speech than he had expected. And not say just anything either—he must make it interesting. Meikis was no orator. If only the chairman would spin out his report a bit, to fill up the time! . . .

Meikis kept letting slip an *also* and *selbstverständlich*, even though he spoke only for a short time—simply opened the meeting and called upon the chairman of the Association.

Pikčiurna's heart was still beating fast. That was not surprising—after all, for the first time in his life he was on a platform to speak, and to speak as a deputy in

the Diet—that is to say, a future deputy. What a responsibility! If only the chairman would go on a little longer....

But however long the chairman might ramble on about all the Association's plans and promises, he had to finish sometime.

"And now I give the floor to Deputy—I mean, to Mr. Pikčiurna, who—whom we shall all elect to the Diet...."

But here was a mess! Pikčiurna was there, but the speech which had been so carefully written out by Meikis' youngest son had been left at home in the table drawer! Pikčiurna discovered the fact only when he heard his name. He felt frantically in pocket after pocket. Not a single sheet of paper. And even the opening which he had learned off by heart flew from his panic-stricken mind.... What the devil am I going to do now? How does it start? But this won't do—Pikčiurna's the biggest farmer in Benagiai, it won't do for Pikčiurna to lose his head! I'll have to speak often when I'm in the Diet! Often! I'll have to hold my own in debates with the *Einheitsfront*—that's nothing. I'll have to find answers for the workers too, and when they start heckling—! ...Pikčiurna's heart beat faster than ever, he sighed deeply, coughed loud and long, and commended himself to God.

"Ladies and gentlemen—"

There was some laughter—probably because the only representative of the "ladies" was Buše Pikčiurnienė, come to admire her son.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Pikčiurna repeated. (What came after that? Ah yes, Klaipėda is the lungs of Lithuania.) "After all, even a fish cannot live without water. And Lithuania likewise cannot live without water—I mean, without a port. And in the same way a port without land equals naught." (I think that's what I wrote?) "But to prevent this port from being taken from

us by the Germans, or worse still, by the Bolsheviks" (aha, I've got the thread now!) "we must be prepared to fight! And if need be—" (I think it was like that?) "if need be, to lay down our lives!"

"You don't say? Right away at once?" somebody jeered.

Meikis in the chair touched some rusty object which gave forth a warning rasp. Pikčiurna felt bolder. If the chairman was calling the heckler to order, he must think Pikčiurna carried some weight, and maybe his speech didn't sound so bad after all.

Pikčiurna plucked up courage, his voice rang more loudly. As a true Lithuanian, born and bred among his people, he had resolved to fight for all that was Lithuanian. And of all things, the most important was the Lithuanian language "in which our fathers and mothers taught us to lisp our infant prayers. Although clouds may gather—" (no, he wanted to say that differently, more eloquently). "Like an oak by the mighty Niemen, Lithuanians stand unafraid, and our Benagai, like a fir-tree green in winter in its glade."

Somebody cheered, somebody clapped. Pikčiurna, however, was trying to collect confused thoughts. For this verse—adapted to fit the case—had been intended for a final flourish, and here he had blurted it out too soon. Never mind, perhaps he would remember something else when the time came.

Well—so he, as the biggest farmer in Benagai, had decided to cast all upon the scales (that had not been written down, but sounded good!)—to cast all upon the scales and fight! And of course, if he were elected to the Diet he would have great opportunities, his hands would be free. He could cleave a road for the Lithuanian people.... Of course, agriculture must be raised to a higher level! The former Diet had completely forgotten it. Farmers could not even feed themselves! Let

alone dress themselves even half decently! A farm like his own, for instance, brought in so little that he couldn't afford to get iron tyres on the cart wheels, let alone other things. Why was grain so cheap? Who was to blame for that? Those Reds, of course! Of course it was all their doing! Why, everyone knew that in Karaliaučius—

"What are you agitating about?" someone shouted. "What's that Karaliaučius got to do with it?"

The chairman's bell rasped angrily.

"Gentlemen, I only wanted to give you an example. But never mind, we'll speak about the Diet. . . . What I wanted to say was. . . . Yes, of course, the Diet! We all know what the German Diets were like. What good did they ever do us? They only led us into a bog, to the verge of a precipice, as the saying goes. It was nothing but townspeople, and they settled everything to suit themselves. Especially the Communists! They make all sorts of rules and regulations. . . ."

"Hey, hold your horses! What are you talking about? Who makes the laws?"

"I'm coming to the laws. Yes, what I wanted to say was—yes—they make laws to protect the idlers, the unemployed. Now what are those unemployed? They are nothing more or less—" (Pikčiurna's speech became more fluent) "nothing more or less than the men who don't want to work! The work-shys! There's always work for those that want it! But of course, gentlemen, it's much more pleasant to get money for nothing, to lie in bed and have everything brought to you—with maybe half a bottle to wash it down. . . ."

"Are you speaking from experience?"

"Yes, I'm speaking from experience," Pikčiurna answered without stopping to think. "When a man comes to me and asks, 'Please, Mr. Pikčiurna, what shall I do now?' then I know he's an idler. A good labourer doesn't ask what to do, he finds something. Looks about

and finds it! But the kind that wait to be given a job, I tell them, 'Get out of here! There's no room for you in my house.' And that's what I shall say in the Diet. I shall bring with me the breath of a new spirit—" (Pikčiurna had never talked like this in his life before!) "—the breath of a new spirit! Each man must do his own work, and not waste his time on politics..." (What came after that? Damn those notes!) "No decent, respectable person can possibly vote for the *Einheitsfront*. Their list is full of nothing but atheists who don't believe in loving your neighbour. And they're not far removed from the most terrible thing of all, the Bolsheviks.... I meant to say the Communists or workers who say there's no need to have churches, they all ought to be turned into restaurants or dance halls and—yes, into dance halls and theatres.

"But where should we be without God? I can give you an example. One night I had to drive home late from Švekšna. And I had with me—what's his name—one of my men. Well, we came to Skomantas Hill. And everybody knows that place is haunted. So I said to him, to that labourer, 'Krizas,' I said, 'this is a bad place.... What if we see a ghost, or that sort of thing. You say a prayer and I'll do the same.' But that Krizas, he just said, 'Why, master—you don't believe in all those silly tales, do you? It's all superstition!' 'No,' I told him, 'it's not superstition, it's God's own truth!' But he just said, 'Then tell me, sir—if a spirit does appear, what kind is it—a good one or a bad one?' So I asked him, 'Do you believe in God?' And what do you think he said? Right away, without even stopping to think! 'No,' he said, 'I believe in neither God nor devil!' That's what he said! 'Neither God nor devil!' And what happened? The very next day when he was climbing up a ladder in the hayloft, a rung broke and he went crashing down, and there he lay with a broken leg. Writhing

there on the ground screaming for help. So then I went up to him and said, 'Well, do you believe in God now? Why didn't I climb up that ladder? Why didn't I break my leg? Because I believe in God!'... And I can tell you another case...."

"Never mind your cases! Come to the point!"

"Am I not speaking to the point? I ask you, gentlemen, not to interrupt. I can see that you there, over in the corner—that's all you've come for, to make yourselves a nuisance. If I'd known before, I'd have had the police here. But it doesn't matter, I know you, I know you one and all! And another thing I can say—it's you and such as you that are creating disorder in the country. You want to tear down everything that we have built ... to destroy all we have created with our blood and sweat—"

And then it began!

Before Pikčiurna could even finish his sentence there was such a noise that he had to stop.

"Hey, d'you hear that? Pikčiurna's sweat! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"Where've you done your sweating? In a feather bed?"

"Show us your hands! Where's your calluses?"

Suddenly he saw two men moving towards the platform with a slow deliberate step; the floor trembled under their feet—at least that was how it seemed to Pikčiurna. What massive shoulders they had, and what hands! One of them rolled up his sleeve.

"Pikčiurna—who was it built that house of yours? You or us? We want an answer! Well? Who was it fell in your yard and was so badly crippled he still goes about on crutches? You or Skriauda? And where were you when your labourer was lying there unconscious? Where were you—with your sweat?"

Pikčiurna's face blanched, he looked round from side

to side for help. The chairman's bell rasped, sputtered and fell silent.

"Come on—out with it—where have you poured out all this blood and sweat?" shouted one of the woodcutters. "Here, wait a bit, don't slink off! We haven't heard anything new from you yet—except about that blood and sweat of yours!"

Pikčiurna had shrunk back to the table, farther from the workers. The chairman whispered something to him, rose, and again the bell rasped.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, order, please! We want—what else have we on the agenda? Nothing more, I think. . . ."

But the noise did not subside.

Meikis, Pikčiurna and a few more like them were trying to push their way through to the exit when the door suddenly opened and Būblys appeared, with Stai-gis looking over his shoulder.

"Late, are we? Too late to hear the new speaker? What a shame! He didn't want to wait for us! What a hurry you're in, gentlemen!" laughed Būblys. He came in, exchanging greetings with his friends here and there while Meikis, Pikčiurna, the chairman and the other members of the Association hurried out, one after the other.

Although Pikčiurna's first public appearance had been no brilliant success, he got into the Diet without any especial difficulty.

11

"Stay in bed a bit more, dear, try to rest a little! Everything's going to be all right, only don't fret!" Trudė Būblienė implored her sick husband. "At least I can feel now that you need me!" she added in a feeble attempt at a joke. But as she straightened the blanket she tried to conceal the trembling of her hands.

They trembled from weariness, from the long nights spent at her husband's bedside, fighting for his life. At first they had thought the illness was only ordinary influenza. Then had come severe headaches, a high temperature and loss of consciousness. Now he was getting better, the danger was over—not so much because of the doctor and his medicines, as thanks to Būblys' own strong constitution and Trudė's devoted nursing. They had had to call the doctor twice. They really should have had him a third time, but there was no money to pay him. Even for the second time they had collected it not lit by lit, but cent by cent. She had handed it to the doctor in small coins. He had even frowned when he saw it.

"Damn this weakness, I'm sick of it!" Būblys answered her. "I'm going to try getting up, see what my legs feel like! What do you say, Trudė?"

Trudė was pleased to see him impatient; it meant he was getting better. But she answered with restraint.

"I think you ought to stay in bed just a few days more," she objected. "If you once get up, you won't go back again. And what if you have a relapse? You ought to get your strength back first."

Get his strength back! What bitter irony there was in the words! As Trudė said them she felt her throat contract. She did not dare look her husband in the face. What was he to get it from? Would boiled potatoes and salt give it to him? Or black bread?

A good thing that Viktoriukas was working, at least. He did not make much, but it was something. Though it did seem a shame for the boy. There he was, doing a man's job and getting only sixty per cent of a man's wage—because he was still under age.

While her husband was ill, Būblienė had not been able to leave the house. And he himself had been unemployed for a long time. Had it not been for the Šilba-

kises, who helped them a little now and then— But they themselves were living from hand to mouth. A good thing Silbakis did at least have a steady job.

Büblys had to have good food. But where was it to come from?

"Well, Trudè, tomorrow I shall get up, anyway!" said Büblys decidedly.

"We'll see about that! There's better ways of committing suicide. Now you just lie quiet, try to get some sleep while I go and make dinner."

She might talk of "making dinner," but the pantry was bare. A good thing it was Friday, tomorrow Viktoriukas would bring fifteen lits. But today? Must she go to Magdè again? Nothing else to be done!

So Trudè hurried over to her sister.

Büblys did not go to sleep. He had had quite enough of sleep during his illness, although it had been snatches of tormented delirium and stupor, not the real sleep that refreshes. Today, however, his head was clear; he wanted to know so many things, everything stirred him, everything concerned him. . . . How could he sleep? Had anyone been from the Union Works, he wondered? He wished one of them would look in and tell him how things were going. Yes, he must certainly get up tomorrow, or the next day at the latest, or he would be dropping right out of everything. The very surroundings here on Sand Street gave one that feeling—it was so quiet, far too quiet. There were no people or traffic about—and if some rare vehicle did pass, it simply raised a cloud of dust. . . . Though of course it was autumn now with pouring rain, and the street was deep in mud. . . . Büblys began to feel the quietness oppressive. Even the clock had been taken out into the kitchen. No sound from Trudè either, no rattle of bucket or clang of frying-pan. Büblys smiled grimly—what had she to put into a pan, anyway? What could she fry? And how on

earth did she manage to feed two strapping men? Where did she get the food? What a woman! What a manager! She worked miracles!

When would he be able at last to make life easier for her? When would he bring about all that they had hoped for, all these years? He could not do it alone. Many hands were needed, great forces. Those forces were growing, but they were not yet strong enough. And now a new danger had appeared across the Niemen. Fascism was in power in Germany, and the country had become one big concentration camp. In the Klaipeda District, too, the local Nazis were making themselves heard more and more. All the dregs, the paltry cravens, the rogues and adventurers got a welcome from them. And many who had only recently been ranting about being such devoted Lithuanian patriots were scuttling to them in the hope of catching some of the crumbs Hitler might let fall. Calling themselves pure-blooded Aryans. He had heard, for instance, that Pikčiurna had become a "real German." Pikčiurna was still in the Diet—but as one of the *Einheitsfront* now. How long was it, by the way, since Būblys had seen him at that election meeting in Benagai? Four years, it must be.

He passed his hand over his face. Better not think about all that, it only made his head ache.

Jurgis Būblys seldom recollected the past, he much preferred to think of the future. But now, lying in bed with nothing to do, his mind ranged far back. He thought of his parents—so young and ignorant they had been when they married, so worried about how to earn enough for the winter and maybe put something by for a rainy day. They talked things over—where was the best place to work, where were seasonal workers paid the best. Finally they went haymaking. They were so young, so inexperienced, especially his mother, that she could not even reckon when she would give birth.

The meadows stretched for thousands upon thousands of acres. On the one side was the water and the bare sand dunes of Nehring, and on the other nothing but meadows right to the horizon. Dozens of miles separated them from the nearest house.

And there on the meadows a son, Jurgis, was born.

The child lived, but the mother bled to death.

So Jurgis was brought up by his grandmother, his father's mother. The father never forgot his dead wife, but he bore his grief in silence. He was always serious and thoughtful. Sometimes when he came home from work he would stroke the child's head and look into his eyes. . . . Jurgis knew now what his father had been seeking—the likeness of his wife. Little Jurgis would forget all else when he gazed into his father's thoughtful face. And so they would commune without words.

As the child grew bigger, the old grandmother began to teach him the little which had once been taught to her. She told him about the sky and the angels, about hell, about a vengeful God who spoke to men with the voice of the thunder as he walked upon the clouds and shook the earth and its dwellers.

But the child had an active mind, he very soon began to think for himself and found a great deal that was not very clear in what his grandmother told him.

"If the thunder is the voice of God, then why does God only talk to people in the summer, when it's hot? And why does it always rain after God's been talking to people? Why doesn't God say anything in the winter? Don't people ever do anything wrong when it's cold?"

"Hold your tongue, chatterbox!" the old woman said angrily. "That's godless talk! Everything is God's will. The Lord talks to His people when He wants. It's not for us to tell Him what to do!"

"Maybe He'd like to talk to us in winter, but it's too

cold for Him, walking about up there on the clouds?" the child wondered.

"Will you be quiet or not?"

But here the father interfered.

"Mother, I've asked you before not to fill his head up with all those old tales!"

Later on his father undertook his education. He taught the boy to think for himself, to try to understand things, although he himself could explain very little of them.

Jurgis was fifteen when his father was arrested and put in prison. He never came back. He was taken because a rich man had been found killed in the village. Somebody had to pay for that, so they took Būblys, who was known as a godless unbeliever. Witnesses were dug up who swore they had heard him quarrelling with the murdered man.

Later on, when the real murderer was found, the Insterburg Prison reported that the convict Būblys had died.

The shock of all this was too much for the grandmother. She lost all faith in God and man, and died of grief and despair.

At about this time a number of young fellows decided to go and look for work in the Ruhr, in the foundries. Jurgis Būblys went too.

He returned four years later. He found a poor welcome. He was still called the son of a murderer. Finally, he went to look for work elsewhere.

It was at this time he met the gentle, fair-haired Trudė Karnelikė.

Then came the war. And then the revolutionary struggle, setbacks, prison. . . .

Būblys sat up in bed. He wanted to know if sitting up would make his head start aching again. No, he only

felt dizzy and rather weak. He must get the better of that weakness. And he would.

To have such a companion in life meant everything. She understood him, she supported him in the struggle. She knew that struggle was for all, not for him alone. And she was always beside him.

Their son! Būblys stretched out his arms as though to embrace the boy. Perhaps it was foolish, but there was nobody to see him. He had been born late, their son, when they had already given up hope. But what a son! One who would really carry on his father's work.

Sounds came from the kitchen, a door opened and closed again. Somebody sat down, sighed heavily. Silence.

"Who's there? Trudė—is that you?"

Nobody answered, but there was another deep sigh.

12

Trudė had to stay longer than she wished with Magdė Šilbakienė. Šnekutienė had come—full of gossip as usual. Trudė much preferred that Barbė should not know why she was there—Barbė could never be trusted to hold her tongue, by tomorrow it would be all round the village that Trudė had nothing to eat. So she sat chatting and laughing with her sisters, asking about this and that, although the news from Benagai did not interest her particularly—especially as she had already heard most of it.

Pikčiurna was a deputy, and all sorts of fine gentlemen were always coming in cars to see him. And Ilžė went about in rustling silk the whole time, she even put on a silk dress to go to the cow-houses.

"Although, of course, she never does a stroke of work there!"

Ilžė had begun making up to old Pikčiurna, he had been to see the Šneikutis and had been full of praise for his daughter-in-law.

She often went to the city, Ilžė did, to that new house and stopped there a long time. Hadn't Trudė or Magdė ever met her? No? But it wasn't such a big city!... Ilžė spent her time there because she couldn't get along with Buše.

"What d'you expect? They're a pair, six of one and half a dozen of the other!"

And then, of course, it was much more convenient to give parties in town. Eh, how Barbė Šneikutienė did wish she could see, just once, what rich people's parties were like in the city!... And Buše, she was getting old, of course, and all she did was sulk and grumble at her son's wife. Nothing Ilžė did could please her.

"Ilžė bought a house in town—that's wrong. What did she buy it for? Isn't the manor good enough for her? When the master and mistress are away, work's never done properly, everything's wasted and squandered! Jokūbas is in the Diet—and that doesn't suit her either. Trying to ape the nobility! All Ilžė's big ideas! The hussy—got everything but the stars in the sky! Such a fine estate! Ilžė wears a hat instead of a kerchief. That's not right either, it's not becoming in a farmer's wife. There's only one thing Buše likes—Jokūbas has become a real fine gentleman. Everyone she sees, she keeps dinning it into their ears, 'My son, the one that's a deputy!' As though she'd got a dozen sons! Oh, those Pikčiurnas! Will I ever live to see their end?"

"Yes, what was I saying? I'm getting old, I forget everything.... Magdė dear, have you ever been in Ilžė's new house, on President Street? No? But I have! The other day I just walked up and rang the bell. I knew she was in town. I wanted to see how she looks when she's here. And why shouldn't I go to see her? It's

true I didn't find her at home, but the maid took me all round and showed me everything. And—eh, my word! In Benagiai they live like dukes, but here! It's Paradise, no other word for it, just Heaven! When Ilžė dies she can say to Almighty God, 'I don't need any Heaven of yours, I've had my Heaven on earth!' But she doesn't bring Horstadolf here with her. He's still little, he might be in her way! And what does she do, I'd like to know, that the child would be in the way? And Buše doesn't want even to set eyes on the boy. She calls him: 'That brat of Ilžė's.'"

"Wagging tongues never tire," burst from Būblienė; she could not stand her elder sister's gossip.

"Who d'you mean that for? Not me, I hope? That's all right, then.... What a handsome man your Viktoriukas is going to be! Who ever would have thought you'd bring up such a fine son, Trudė! Although I hear he's following his father's ways, poor boy! Eh dear, he'll find himself in jail too, one of these days! There's no escaping the hand of God! And it's a godless son you've brought up, sister!..."

At last Šnektienė took herself off, and Magdė Šilbakienė gave Trudė something for dinner.

She hurried home, glanced into the kitchen—and stopped dead. There was Viktoriukas sitting by the table, his head in his hands. The last bread-winner out of work, was the thought that flashed through Trudė's mind. But she must not show the boy how much it alarmed her. Hadn't Magdė dropped a word about work for Trudė? She would have to run over and see tomorrow. It would be something, at least....

"What's the matter, son? Are you ill? Maybe you'd better lie down a bit?"

"No, Mum, I'm not ill. But I can lie down all I want now."

"Why?"

"Sacked."

"Sacked?"

She said it with a note of surprise. But she had known it would happen sometime. Troubles never come singly.

"How was that?"

"I don't know how to tell you. It's disgusting. And I don't understand all of it, either."

"Did someone report you? You took leaflets in yesterday."

"Yes, somebody must have been talking. But it's not only that, Mum."

"Don't get upset, son! We won't say anything to Father. Let him get his health back first. But you must tell me everything. We must decide what's best to do."

"It's that Glega that's so horrible."

"Glega? Who's Glega?"

"The manager."

"What did he want with you?"

"Well, it's this way. I've noticed a long time he seemed to be sort of watching me, sometimes he'd start being awfully friendly in a queer way, coming round with a silly kind of smile. I thought he knew what I was doing and was trying to catch me out. Then this morning Šeškus came to me, that's one of his toadies—he came up with the same silly smile, and said, 'Go to the manager, he's waiting for you in his private office.' All the men who heard were worried, and one fellow—Pareigiukas, you know him, I've told you about him—he came hurrying over and said, 'Viktoras,* don't go, listen to me, don't go!' But I thought it was something to do with work, so I went."

"And what happened?"

"I went in. Glega was sitting on a sofa with a small

* Viktoras—Viktoriukas when addressing a child.—*Tr.*

table in front of him, and a lot of good things on it—apples and sweets and a bottle with two glasses. I asked him what he wanted me for. And he said, 'Don't be so standoffish, come here, sit down and talk to me. . . . I want to give you easier work. It's too hard for you, the work you're doing. You will ruin all your youth! Sit down! Have a drink!' I told him I don't drink. And he said, 'What, not drink? Haven't you learned yet? All workers drink.' And—well, he proposed all kinds of things, and then he pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and told me to sign it."

"What was on it, that paper?" Trudè felt the blood draining from her face.

"I don't know. I jumped up and the table fell over. I think I called him a swine. And then, Mother, his face went all twisted, he was in such a rage! But you know, when he got furious like that, I stopped being frightened. Then he pulled one of the last leaflets I brought out of his pocket and shouted, 'Who brings these filthy sheets into the factory?' And I told him, 'Since it's in your pocket, you ought to know best. Why d'you ask me?' I could see he was trying to speak quietly. And then he started off again saying I was so young, and I was following my father's ways already. And didn't I know what I could get for those leaflets? Didn't I know they were inciting one part of the population against another? If I didn't know what that meant, he could explain it. . . . He talked and talked a long time, I didn't listen to it all. But he made it clear that if I kept in with him, I'd be well off. I'd never have to carry beams and I'd always have plenty of money in my pocket.

"But I told him I'd sooner carry beams honestly than fill my pockets with dirty money. Then he started yelling at me, he yelled so that somebody opened the door and looked in. He shouted that he could grind me to powder, crush me like a worm if I didn't obey him.

I told him I wasn't going to work any more, I was going home. He went on shouting something more but I didn't hear what it was, I just ran away. . . . But, Mother, maybe I ought to go back? It's pay-day tomorrow! And if I don't, I shan't get anything."

Trudė had never been lavish with expressions of affection, but now she went up to her son, put her arms round him and drew him close.

"No, Viktoras, you won't go back there any more."

"But what will he do with the leaflet? That Šeškus who gave it to him probably informed on all the men who read it. If I don't go back they'll dig down further. And besides, I—I gave him a sock in the jaw. . . ."

"And you did quite right, son! I hope you gave him one that'll stop him trying that sort of thing again. Don't be afraid of anything, be like your father!"

13

Būblys got up a few days later.

"Well, can we talk to you now?" asked his comrades when they came to visit him.

"You can, and you should!" smiled Būblys. "It's a long time since I've seen you! And a long time since we've talked things over."

"We've been here often enough, but you were not receiving!"

"Oh, is that so?" Būblys gave a searching look at his wife, but Trudė slipped quietly out of the room.

"It's not her fault! But it's good that we can really discuss things now."

There was plenty to discuss. A representative of the Central Committee of the Party had come from Kaunas bringing a message. The Central Committee warned them that conditions for political work in the Klaipėda District might become more difficult. Instead of fighting

Hitler's adherents who were becoming bolder than ever, Smetona's fascist government was hounding the Communists and all progressives. Under the wing of the government, the Nazis were preparing to tear Klaipėda away from Lithuania. They were operating together with the Voldemaras group of fascists, whom Germany was helping to seize power in Lithuania itself. The Central Committee said work must be intensified among the Klaipėda proletariat of all nationalities, to show concretely that the Nazis were using the slogan of a German national movement as camouflage. Therefore, the Klaipėda Communists would have to play a most important role in the struggle against the Nazis and for the liberation of Lithuania.

Būblys listened in silence, then rose and began to pace the room, as he often did.

"So that's how it is, comrades!" he said. "There's a smell of gunpowder, and we're in the front lines.... Well, we'll do our best to stand firm."

"We've started to act already. Have you heard about it?"

No, Būblys did not know that yesterday the Nazi propaganda ship *Prussia* had left for the last time that year.

Every time that ship appeared, something like a demonstration was arranged in Klaipėda port. The ship's siren would scream out the news of its coming to the local Nazis, and the band would play "*Deutschland über alles*" and the "*Horst Wessel*" song.

And yesterday, when the ship was due to sail, nearly all the Nazi lickspittles in the city had come to the port again. As soon as the siren sounded and the ship began slowly to move—as though reluctant to go—they raised an indescribable din.

The police were there with guns and rubber truncheons, but they did nothing. Only when the Nazis went a bit too far and began to hustle peaceable passers-by,

they fired a few shots, and killed a docker—a lad of nineteen.

"The dockers took that as a challenge. One and all, German or Lithuanian, they decided to hit back."

"Quite right!" said Būblys. "Well, what then?"

"The dockers showed they understand all about the attempts to divide them into Germans and Lithuanians and set them against each other. And when they started to act, the Nazis scampered off with their tails between their legs. The whole port was clear of them in a quarter of an hour. And this time the *Prussia* left without any '*Horst Wessel*.' There's going to be a demonstration tomorrow. The workers at the cellulose factory proposed it themselves and the Luise Plywood Mill backed them up. The victim is going to be carried through the whole city."

"The police won't dare to show themselves this time!"

"Let them just try!"

"Well. . . . What else?"

There was news in plenty. The Klaipeda Diet was to meet in a few days to discuss unemployment relief and wages. The bosses were making their own preparations. Just this morning the machines had been stopped in the Union Mineral Fertilizer Works and all the workers discharged. Obviously a temporary stoppage. To scare the workers. But although there were hundreds of unemployed round the factory gates, not one had gone in to ask for a job. They all backed up the discharged men. The next piece of news was that the authorities were trying to prevent the contract with the Soviet Exportles being carried out. What did it matter to them that this contract would provide work for nearly three thousand men? They kept harping on the one thing. "We've got enough bother with our own Communists! Want to poison the whole air?"

So a demonstration was to be held on the day when the Diet discussed labour questions.

"Everything ready?"

"It will be. There'll be the sawmill workers, the Union and the Luise. This morning there's to be a meeting of the unemployed. It'll choose a new board for the mutual aid fund, but the demonstration will be discussed as well."

"You know, I think I'll go with you," said Būblys. "I was a member of the board too, and the unemployed all know me. Trudė, where's my jacket?"

Trudė came running in, alarmed, from the kitchen.

"Jurgis, can't you stop at home for at least one more day? Wait till tomorrow to go out!"

But Jurgis was not listening. The excitement made his hands tremble, his legs buckled under him, but he tried to hide it. From Trudė, however, nothing could be hidden. She went to the cupboard and took out her coat and shawl.

"Where are you going?"

"With you!"

"With me? But there's no need for that! What a woman—!"

Trudė and Viktoras went with Būblys and his comrades to the unemployed meeting.

It was in full swing when they arrived. Blue police caps were very much in evidence by the doors and inside the packed hall. There were so many of them that Būblys had to laugh: "Oho! A regular guard of honour!"

Būblys was recognized at once; there were greetings from all sides, and way was made for him to the platform.

From there he could see everything. In spite of the large numbers of police, the atmosphere was charged to the danger point, and the crowd was obviously angry with the speaker.

"Why, it's Kislius, that Social-Democrat in the Diet," said Būblys, peering up at the rostrum. "What rubbish is he talking?"

The noise increased. Kislius was hot, he took out a large handkerchief, mopped his face, and hurried to finish.

"I must warn you once more that we cannot demand much. There are many unemployed, work is scarce, and we won't get anything out of the employers by force..."

He assured his hearers that the Social-Democrats had the workers' true interests at heart, that they were trying to get some sort of concessions, some sort of reforms, to get some crumbs at least, because even crumbs mattered. "A chicken pecks its food grain by grain and gets fat." The meeting must have confidence in him. He and his comrades, the Social-Democrats, thought only of the workers and therefore he advised all present to elect Social-Democrats to the board.

Here, however, the noise became so great that the speaker's voice was completely drowned out. Kislius looked from side to side in confusion, but from right and left the shouts came like bullets.

"Lickspittle!"

"Judas!"

"Crumb-picker!"

"Away with the scum!"

Būblys could see more and more police pushing their way into the hall. If this noise goes on, he thought, they'll break up the meeting. And despite his weakness, he rose and asked for quiet.

While he waited for the noise to die down, he let his eyes travel over the faces of the people in the hall. In most of them he saw resolution, firm courage, enthusiasm, but in some there was apathy, disappointment, even something like reproach. No, the unemployed didn't have an easy time of it, not by a long way! The women's faces

were weary with anxiety over trying to make ends meet and get a cup of milk for the children now and then. How Būblys wished he could take their hands, put an arm round their shoulders and say, "Don't despair, dear friends! We're going to change everything."

The noise died down, and Būblys began to speak. His voice was clear, but not very loud, and Trudė thought he should perhaps not have tried to speak today—he was still so weak.

"Mr. Kislius advises us not to demand too much. Like all the mill-owners, landowners and rich men generally, he is horrified whenever the workers or the unemployed demand even half-way decent conditions. If you were to go by what the Social-Democrats say, we workers ought just to bow humbly to the bosses and ask their charity, beg for the crumbs which fall from their loaded tables. We know how much the bosses worry about our needs, how wonderfully they look after us! We've had a taste of their kindness! Just now they're throwing hundreds of people at the Union on to the street. But they're making a bad mistake if they think they'll find any strike-breakers among us—they won't. Our future depends on ourselves alone, comrades, on our resolution and our unity. Neither the German nor the Lithuanian fascists will do anything for us. They're as like as a pair of gloves. Have you ever heard of a bourgeois government siding with the workers? What did it do to protect the cellulose workers from German exploitation? What has it done for the workers at the textile mill? Or the Union? Nothing! Exactly nothing! Fines often eat up half a man's wages. Those capitalist gentry clap on fines whenever they like. All they do is think out new ways of fining the workers, so as not to pay them their wages."

Būblys' voice rang out more strongly. People drank in every word with eager attention. And a movement ran through the hall when he said, "We do not *ask* for work

for the unemployed, we *demand* it. Those who cannot be given work for the moment must be paid relief that ensures the living minimum. And we must declare our support for the demand of other workers that fines be lifted. We demand higher wages. We demand a revision of the social insurance law that eats into the rights of workers...."

The excitement in the hall was mounting and there were shouts of approbation.

"That's true! Bravo! Go on, go on!"

"There's one more demand, a very important one. We workers of the Klaipeda District, whatever our nationality, German or Lithuanian, must demand that our workers' organizations be permitted to exist legally. All the concessions are made to Hitler's fascists, all the favours are shown to them. So, therefore, we must oppose them with our united front, a front of all workers, Lithuanians and Germans! We must unite because our interests are the same. And we'll not stand for any attempts to keep us down. We want complete freedom for our meetings...."

"Bravo! Bravo!"

"We want freedom!"

"We want work!"

The police would not let Būblys speak any more, and the meeting was closed.

14

The grey old town hall stood on Luise Street, just opposite the place where the monument used to be. The building had been old even at the time when Queen Luise of Prussia, fleeing from Napoleon, came to Klaipeda. It had been given to her, her husband and children because the town, at that time a fishing village, had none better. And since she had graciously consented to honour this building with her presence, a memorial plaque had been

put up in the corridor and her portrait, life-size, hung in the conference hall to remind all who had the honour to enter it that a queen had once lived there.

It was in this hall, beneath the portrait, that the Diet held its meetings. Here young Pikčiurna had his seat, here he voted and here he earned his salary as deputy. The work was not very onerous, especially as he was an experienced man. For a number of years before this he had sat in the Diet as one of the Lithuanian Farmers' Group. Of course, choosing that party had been a mistake which could not but bring undesirable consequences; he had had to let the grass grow over it, as the saying goes, to let it be forgotten.

And forgotten it was, thank Heaven. The new trend distracted attention from Pikčiurna—or to be more exact, it brought him before the public eye in a different way. The really important thing was that he had managed in good time to declare himself German through and through, a champion of the Reich and the Führer. There had been many in Klaipeda who were not yet sure whether Hitler would manage to get power in Germany and had hesitated to declare themselves his followers. But Pikčiurna did not hesitate, no, he was not that kind of man! True, he again only just escaped doing something irretrievably foolish. He almost joined Pastor Sass' pro-Hitler group. People were buzzing round this drunken pastor like flies round a honey pot. But Benagys put him wise.

"Are you mad, Pikčiurna? Tomorrow I'll bring you a real leader of the Sovoga,* *Herr* Dr. Neumann, you can join them."

Pikčiurna followed this advice. Had he not done so, he would not have been sitting in the Diet today. But Benagys trusted him. It was Benagys who had got him

* A Nazi organization in Klaipeda.

in—Benagys and Ilžė. With a wife like Ilžė you'd always be on top!

Ilžė knew how to get what she wanted. She had had the salon in her town house decorated as she wished, and there she received her guests. She herself had never been so handsome as now. The circle of her acquaintances was spreading. Deputies, important officials, big land-owners, and factory-owners, all came to her house.

But one couldn't say Ilžė Pikčiurnienė spent her whole time in the city. No, she visited Benagiai, too, quite often. There were things which only she could get done.

Pikčiurna himself, it is true, would have preferred never to see Benagiai, he was quite content to live in town. But the trouble was, the Diet would meet for a day or two, or maybe three, and that would be the end until the next month. That was one thing, and the second was that if he did not visit his constituency, his income would not come to very much. There would be none of those expense items that mounted up to such a good round sum. So. . .

One day, however, young Pikčiurna was called home by a telegram brought to him right at a meeting of the Diet. Of course it was pleasant to feel himself so important, but all the same, why did they want him in all this hurry? Ilžė had been in Benagiai for over a week already, a long time. And the telegram was queer. Why did she have to send a telegram?

Young Pikčiurna did not believe in worrying, however. He decided to take the evening train. He whistled cheerfully as he walked along the platform; the cigar he lighted tasted good. Why worry? He would know what it was all about in a few hours. Perhaps a horse had broken its leg, or some labourer had run off. Nothing to get excited about.

However, he learned the whole story sooner than he expected. The whistle had already sounded when the door

burst open and—Pikčiurna could hardly believe his eyes—his aunt Šnekutienė tumbled into the compartment. She was on her way home from a visit to the city.

"Well now, Jokūbas!" she cried, beaming. "Now isn't this nice that I've met you! I suppose you don't even know all that's been happening at home, in Benagai, do you?"

"The devil alone knows what it's all about!" cried Pikčiurna. "They brought me a telegram right at a meeting of the Diet! I've no idea what they want."

"Ah, don't you know? Then I'll tell you about it, the whole story. . . ."

Šnekutienė settled herself more comfortably, and Pikčiurna felt that the story would be a long one.

"Yes, one thing I declare—God's no longer in His Heaven. No! Maybe He was once, but now He's not! I'm beginning to think the way Būblys does. . . . And after all, what does the Holy Writ say?—'To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.' Now tell me—what is that child going to do now?"

"What child?" asked Pikčiurna, intrigued.

"Why, Petras, your shepherd lad! They found him the day before yesterday. . . . But I don't know where to start with it all. You see, it was this way. One day Petras disappeared. Disappeared, and that was all! Nobody bothered looking for him. And after all, why should they, when Ilžė said he'd gone to visit his mother? She's a widow with a whole houseful of children, and she's very poor. So Ilžė said he'd gone to see his mother and she'd even given him a big loaf and some other things so there'd be something to eat at home. And then—all of a sudden your mother found her savings-bank book had disappeared and a whole pile of money that was with it. Heavens, you should have seen how she carried on! Buše came running over to me screaming like a madwoman with

'Barbè! Oh Jesus! Jesus! Barbè!' She was tearing her hair, and then she started beating her head against the wall. I tell you, I was scared out of my wits, I thought she had gone out of her mind. Don't be angry, Jokūbas, I'm telling you just what happened. I called my husband and I said to him, 'Hold her, Šnekutis, hold her!' I was so scared I even forgot his first name. . . . 'Hold her,' I told him, 'she's gone mad!' And she started yelling at me, 'You're mad yourself! You're raving yourself.' So I said to her, 'Buše dear,' I said, 'it's not me that's screaming for Jesus, I'm not trying to knock down the wall with my head.' And she comes back with 'You'd be calling Jesus and beating the wall if your money'd been stolen!'"

"What's that? Money been stolen? When? Who took it?" cried Pikčiurna, alarmed.

"Yes, money!" snapped Šnekutienė, angry at the interruption. "Don't muddle me, I'm telling you everything just as it happened. . . . Well, I said to her, 'Dear Buše,' I said, 'money is the root of all evil. I thank the Lord God that I have none, for then I can never fall into temptation, and never have to suffer because of it.' But she only said, 'Hold your tongue! What shall I do now? Where can I go? Oh Jesus, Jesus!' And I said to her, 'Where can you go? God's eye is everywhere. Better tell me what's happened! And don't scream as though someone was murdering you!'"

"Well, so then she told me all about it. She called on God and Jesus, she cursed the thief and swore he'd choke with her money. But all I could understand was that she had gone to town, and when she came back she'd gone to the cupboard for something or other, and found the money and savings-book had both gone. And it isn't difficult to take out the money entered in the book, either. She went for your father but he knew nothing. He only stood there, all white, with his mouth open, and not a word out of him.

"'Who's been in this room?' 'Nobody!' 'But somebody must have been in!' 'Nobody was, only Ilžė came to talk to me.' She always goes to see the old man when Buše's away. 'It's Ilžė, then,' she raved, 'Ilžė! That devil!'

"But your father wouldn't have that. 'Think what you're saying!' he told her. 'I was here the whole time. How can you accuse your daughter-in-law of theft? She's a decent woman!' 'Then who was it, who?' she cried.

"Off she went to Ilžė. Ilžė thought and thought, at last she said she had an idea. It must be Petras.

"'But Petras never comes in here!' 'This time he must have done! Who else could it be?' And Ilžė suddenly remembered she'd sent Petras to fetch Horstadolf, and she'd seen him coming out of the old people's room. She'd even asked him what he was doing there. And directly after that he'd asked permission to go and see his mother. Said he was lonesome for her. And Ilžė, suspecting nothing, had let him go! After all, she could always use Valaitis for his work.

"'That's all rubbish about Petras,' I told Buše. 'Where'd he get the keys? You didn't hang them on his nose! Everything you've got is under seven locks and nine seals! And then you think that child could get at your things?'"

"Aunt Šneikutienė!" said Pikčiurna, highly offended. "If my wife says so, then it is so. And let there be no doubt about it."

"Well, I've got plenty of doubts!" Aunt Šneikutienė was quite ready to argue with her nephew. "And that's what I told your mother when she asked who it could be. 'Who?' I said, 'it's someone who knows all about picking locks. This is a matter for the gendarme. Why didn't you go there at once, instead of coming to me?' But she said, 'Pikčiurna's gone for the gendarme.' 'Well,' I said, 'what more do you want?' 'Where's my money?' she said. 'Where shall I look?' And I said to her, I told her right

out, 'Buše, my dear, when it's a matter of money you've always known how to find it! Why can't you guess now?' That's what I said to her! Jokūbas, I'll never forget as long as I live the way she squeezed me for everything she'd ever lent me, and with interest, too! What I say is, God sees all but doesn't reveal it at once. I don't mean that for you, Jokūbas, you've never treated me wrong! But Buše, your mother, my sister—"

"Well, what happened after that?" said Pikčiurna impatiently.

"She didn't say another word but went straight off home. And I didn't hear anything more about it. I only know the gendarme came. But where and what and how—nobody told me. It all happened last week. But the day before yesterday—! No, there is a God! Now just sit quiet, Jokūbas, while I tell you. I went to see Valaitienė and it seemed she knew everything. And dear Lord above, the world must be coming to an end! It's the real end of the world, that it is!

"It happened this way. A dog found Petras. Everybody was looking for him and couldn't find him. And then a dog found him. Valaitis, your man, was busy in the yard, and suddenly he noticed the dog that always minds the sheep with Petras scratching and scratching at the cellar door, and barking, and whining, so Valaitis began to wonder—'What does he want? What's he looking for?' And the dog kept scratching and whining, and then he looked up at Valaitis, just like a human being it was, as though he were trying to say, 'Open the door, you'll see for yourself.' Well, Valaitis couldn't open the cellar door because it was locked. He went all round it but he couldn't see anything queer. And then he suddenly remembered Petras. Maybe he's there? he thought. Maybe that's why the dog's getting all excited? So he asked the dog, 'Where's Petras?' And that dog looked straight at the door as though expecting him to come right out.

So then Valaitis went to your mother and asked for the key.

“‘What key?’ she asked, real cross she was. She was lying in bed, ill. She went straight to bed as soon as that money was stolen. ‘What key?’ she said. ‘The key of the cellar.’ ‘Go to Ilžė. Don’t you know I haven’t the keys any more?’ And then she turned to the wall. So Valaitis went to Ilžė. ‘Give me the cellar key, Pikčiurnienė,’ he said.”

Pikčiurna lost his temper.

“How dare he talk like that to my wife? Getting a bit above himself, is he?”

“I don’t know anything about that! But Valaitis kept saying, ‘Give me the cellar key!’ And your wife said, ‘No, I won’t! How dare you come to me demanding keys! You’ll answer for this, Valaitis!’ ”

“And quite right! That’s the way to talk to him!” said Pikčiurna approvingly. “Well, what next?”

“The next thing was that Valaitis turned round and went out, and shouted so the whole yard could hear, ‘Give me an axe!’

“Lėnė told me Ilžė was so frightened he was going to kill her, she crawled right under the bed. But I don’t believe that, Jokūbas. She’s not that kind. But she was frightened all right, she was frightened.

“But it wasn’t her Valaitis was thinking of. He broke in the door of the cellar. Well, in a word, he found Petras. . . . He was unconscious, all beaten up, his hands tied—and so tightly they were not only swollen, they were blue. Valaitis and Lėnė carried him out into the yard. But first they put something over his eyes so that the light wouldn’t hurt them, and then they untied his hands. They had to cut the rope with a knife. And you could have cried to see the way that dog ran up to him and whined and licked his swollen hands. Nay, Jokūbas, if you’d been at home there’d have been none of all this.

And just think what's going to happen now! The noise brought everybody running. The maids were all crying, and the men grinding their teeth. Old Pikčiurna, your father, came along, too. He was struck dumb when he saw it all, and real frightened. He swore that he knew nothing about it. And he really did know nothing. But Buše—she knew it all. But she came too. 'What's all this noise?' And Valaitis said to her, he said, 'Buše Pikčiurnienė, what have you done to this child?' 'I? What have I done? It's the gendarme, not me.... And why doesn't the brat confess? You! What have you done with my money? I nearly died!' 'High time you did croak,' said one of the labourers. 'Look at those hands of his, and then open your trap again if you dare, you devil's scum!'

Young Pikčiurna jumped to his feet, but the compartment was small so all he could do was stamp and clench his fists.

"I'll show them, damn them! This very evening I'll have everyone—"

But Šnekutienė, in fine spirits, continued her tale.

"Buše looked at the boy's hands, and I don't know whether it was because of them, or because of the names they called her, but she got all excited and started screaming. How she screamed and called on Jesus! She's always calling on Jesus lately. And then suddenly—down she flopped on the ground and yelled, 'Water! Water! I'm dying!' But nobody even moved. One of the men—I think it was the same one who spoke before—he just said, 'No hope of that! It'll take an axe to finish this one off! She ought to have her mug smashed in!' You know, Jokūbas, say what you like, I think that's wrong. Buše's an old woman now, one foot in the grave, you might say! What if she really had died there? What then? It could have given her heart failure, looking at a terrible thing like that."

"Stop rambling! How did it end?" Pikčiurna shouted so loudly that passengers came from the next compartment to take a look. "It's all a conspiracy! Things like this in my house!"

"Wait a bit, you haven't heard it all yet! Valaitis ordered the men to harness up the horses at once and take the child to the doctor. And the doctor said maybe both his hands will have to be cut off! What do you think of that? And the boy didn't know anything at all about the money. It was quite true he'd been to see his mother. Ilžė sent him herself. Then when he came back, she called him down there into the cellar. And after that the gendarme came and he—no, I can't even tell you, it's too terrible. They wanted to make the boy confess. And I've heard his mother's been taken too and put in prison. So there you are, you see what happens when you're not at home. But that's not all, yet. As soon as they'd taken the child away, the labourers started a real riot. They just left Buše lying there on the grass—I say myself that was not right—and got together right there and discussed it all. Folks say they abused Buše something awful, until she managed to get up and run away home. But they abused Ilžė, your wife, even worse. The things they called her! Folks say they called her all the worst names there are! They say she was as pale as a corpse and kept running from one window to the other and wringing her hands. And they kept shouting at her, 'It's you, you snake, that stole the money!'"

"But how dared they?" gasped Pikčiurna, amazed.

"They dared all right! And then the men and the girls rolled up their bundles and marched off, one and all. And Kristupas Belaukis, that old labourer of yours, he even shouted, 'We'll come back yet, you accursed Pikčiurnas! We'll come back again! But it won't be our bundles we'll have in our hands, it'll be something else!' I don't know what he could have meant, but they ought to have a

lesson, Jokūbas! Though we are all in the hands of God. And Lėnė ran to Ilžė's window, smashed the glass and spat through it. And the words she said I wouldn't repeat. I've always been a decent woman."

"What the devil—! What the devil—! No, I didn't expect anything like this!" Pikčiurna thought aloud, biting his lips angrily.

He came home badly worried. Everything was upside-down. Old Pikčiurna was like a shadow; he kept wandering about from corner to corner, talking to himself and racking his brains, trying to guess who could have stolen the money. That it was Petras he did not want to believe, that it was Ilžė he could not believe. Who was it, then? It was a problem.

Buše did not get up from her bed. The blow had been too heavy, a blow like that could fell a bull, let alone Buše.

"All the money and the book too! God in Heaven, why did you allow it? What devil did it? What fiend?" Day and night she sobbed and bit her pillow. But that did not help. The gendarme did not appear again.

Young Pikčiurna tried to quiet his mother. He told her he would turn the whole world upside-down, but he'd find his money somehow.

"It's my money, not yours!" Buše Pikčiurnienė protested. "That's a fine idea! Who earned it—you or me?"

Her son, however, shrugged indifferently:

"If it's yours, then it's mine. You can't take it into the grave with you. You won't need it there. But I need it here. I've a son. And there'll be other children."

"You dirty villain!" screamed Buše. "What's that you said? Maybe you stolė it yourself?"

"What?"

"Oh, I know, you weren't at home. But Ilžė was. And she says—"

"Mother, you know quite well who stole it! So stop

talking nonsense. The thief's in the hospital, and the receiver's in prison. That means we'll find the money! You've just got to have patience and not get frantic!"

That was easy enough to say. But try not to get frantic when you can't trust anything or anybody. If only she had been well! Oh, how she would have run here and there, how she would have searched, and turned everything over! And of course she would have found it! But now—!

"Oh Jesus, Jesus, all my money, all my lovely money..."

Of course it had not been quite all. But she wasn't going to tell her son, or anyone else either, that she still had another savings-bank book hidden in a corner of her bed.

"Oh God, oh God, all my money! And I'd been saving it up for a coffin. A coffin and the funeral! And a tombstone for my grave! A tombstone for myself and my husband, your father! Do you understand, Jokūbas, what that means? I wanted a marble stone. You'll never give me one unless the money's found. You'll just bury me like a dog and fill up the grave and spread sand over it. There'll be nothing to remind people of me when they come to the cemetery, everybody will forget me. They'll see an unmarked grave, they'll give it a kick and say, 'Who's buried here?' But if there were a real fine tombstone, folks'd all take off their hats and say, 'This is the grave of Buše Karnelikė-Pikčiurnienė, God rest her soul' "

"We won't leave your grave unmarked! Only be quiet and stop getting all upset!"

"I can't help being upset! I can't help it! I don't want my grave to be trampled down, levelled with the ground. Is that the right way to treat me?"

"But it won't be, I tell you! Stop worrying about it!"

Her son was thoroughly sick of these lamentations.

"I can order everything now, if you like, just the way you want it. . . ."

"Oh, so that's it, is it? In such a hurry you can't even wait for me to die?"

"Hell, no! I'm waiting for you to get well! I only suggested it to calm you!"

Buše, however, refused to listen to anything. He and his wife wanted her to die. Otherwise he'd have found some other way to calm her. . . . Then suddenly she became very quiet.

"All right—go!"

"Where?"

"To find that money, and as quickly as possible."

"All right."

But he went nowhere. He stopped at home, and so did his wife. It would not look well for them to go away when his mother was dying. And she really was dying.

15

This time they did not send for the doctor, they sent for the pastor. He came and gave Pikčiurnienė some parting words of exhortation to smooth her path to a better world. He promised her the Kingdom of Heaven and great rewards for all her good and noble deeds, for her boundless love for her neighbour.

White-robed angels bearing palm branches and singing psalms would receive her soul and bear it to the Heavenly Gates.

Pikčiurnienė was left thoughtful. Dear God, am I really going to die? No getting out of it or putting it off? . . . She was always talking about dying, that was true, especially since this misfortune had struck her, but she herself had never really believed it.

She calmed down again, however. After all, she was still alive! And who could tell, people were often so ill

that everybody thought it was hopeless, and then before you knew it they were walking about again. Couldn't a miracle like that happen to her? Of course it could!

She must keep quiet and not get excited. But how could she help it?

But no, Pikčiurnienė would not worry any more. If the money was gone, it was gone. There was plenty more left. Plenty! Only I mustn't get excited, she thought. And I'm not excited, not at all, although it's a hard blow. But all the same . . . some day— No, I'm not going to think of that any more.

But go back and remember all her life—that she could do. For time seemed to drag endlessly, as though evening would never come.

Yes. . . . The pastor, too, he said all my life I've only lived for others. And that's true! True as Gospel! And what thanks have I ever had for it? Only black ingratitude!

Of course, Pikčiurnienė's mind turned first to her sisters.

From the time they were small I looked after them. Because they were younger, they were ignorant, and I always had to keep an eye on them. Father—God rest his soul in peace!—was nothing but a loafer and a drunkard. We went about in rags while he got into debt. If it hadn't been for me, we'd all have had to beg our bread. And Mother—God rest her!—was no better. She wasn't so lazy, but she was a bad manager. And a real feather-brain! Now what sort of life would my dear sisters have had with parents like that if it hadn't been for me? Everything was in my hands, it was I who kept things going. Then Father drove us out of the house. . . . It was God's will. . . . And Šnekutienė gobbled up everything Father left! I never even got a smell of it, nor did the others. And the way she buried Father! Better not think of it. But all the same it wrings my heart to remember. The

Šilbakises treated me like an enemy. They just scraped along in that hole of theirs, but when I suggested they sell to me—not they! Better sell to a stranger! And what did they get for it all? It was disgraceful. They'd take any paltry sum rather than please a sister. . . . And the Būblyses? Būblienė? Asked me for money. Money, indeed! I fixed her!

Though I did send her the money, after all.

Pikčiurnienė recalled the trick she had played on Būblienė. Just before the old German currency was exchanged for the Lithuanian lits she got the fine idea of returning the money she had once borrowed from Būblienė. So she sent her four hundred marks by mail. It cost as much to send it. But the money came back. She hadn't taken it! All right, if she didn't want it she needn't have it!

But that Būblys? That is a real affliction the Lord had laid upon me, a real cross, she thought. Take that affair with Pluta's horse! It ended all right though; I got him jailed for it. But still, the judge didn't do right. He started ferreting round, the rascal, and when he'd finished, he said that Būblys didn't steal the horse, he merely took the law into his own hands. And they only gave him six months for it. And they said if he'd been quieter in court and hadn't been sentenced before he wouldn't have got even that. And my testimony about how he threatened me didn't help at all. I hadn't the right kind of witnesses. Though after all, six months isn't so little. . . . But to think how much I paid the judges! If I hadn't bribed them, they'd have let him off altogether! A Spartakist—that's who managed to get into my family! Lord God, what a disgrace! And that disgrace is the cross I have carried my whole life. People haven't forgotten it yet! They still sneer and say, "Your brother-in-law!" "Your brother-in-law's in jail again!" And there's nothing I can do. "Your brother-in-law—" And there it is. I can go on telling them till I'm black in the face that I've had nothing to do with

them for years, it's all the same, they still keep on. Well, you can't gag folks. So they go on throwing up that "brother-in-law" to me.

And those mangy curs, those Spartakists, they actually had a child, too! What did they want with a child? What would they do with it?

Pikčiurnienė had never forgotten that the child was unchristened. And the name they'd given it! Viktoras! What was wrong with Jokūbas, or Mikas, or Martynas? But no! Not they! And Trudė, she was downright insolent when the pastor went to see her.

I sent Šnekutienė to her. "Soften your heart, let the child be christened, I'll take him to the church myself. Būblys will never know anything about it. But the neighbours will know the child is a Christian! Then folks won't turn away from him. Now just think—can you find a single child here that's not been christened?" That's what Barbė, Šnekutienė told her, talked to her as a sister, tried to bring her to a more proper frame of mind. But Trudė only kept on saying, "No! My child shall grow up free, unfettered by any old superstitions!" Lord God in Heaven! She calls the word of God old superstitions! "Let nothing stand in his way in the future," she said.

God Almighty, how can he ever hope for any future, how can anything good ever come of him if he's not a Christian? He hasn't even the right to be alive, to call himself a human being. . . . May Trudė burn in eternal fire!

But Pikčiurnienė could not be satisfied with merely consigning her sister to the pit. She wanted to see Trudė burning, see it with her own eyes. That would be something to gloat over! Then she could say, "You see, my dear Trudė? You see? And do you know what this is for?"

So that was how things stood with those Būblyses. That chapter was closed. She had plenty to think about

without the Būblyses. Why did things keep coming back to her like this today? A drowning man, they say, sees his whole life pass before him in a flash. But Pikčiurnienė wasn't drowning and wasn't dying! Not she! She was just letting herself remember all the past because she had nothing else to do...

Pikčiurna had one foot in the grave too, but he still went on taking snuff and chewing tobacco. He'd even started to smoke a pipe. Said it would help him to stop the chewing and the snuff. But had it? Not a sign! Aye, if the devil came and snatched up his soul one day, he'd not let Pikčiurna out of his claws.

I'll never see Pikčiurna in Heaven! He'll burn in hell, like Būblys.

Eh, but I'm sick of him, how sick I am of always having him round! To spend all your life with that lump ... and a long life it's been. ... Still, I did manage to get him out of one thing. He learned to keep his fists to himself. Once he got the oil-lamp on his head, and once he got my foot. That was enough for him. I'm sorry about the lamp, though. It was a good one, with pendants. And these pendants were all that was left of it. Well, never mind. I had to get better lamps for the new house anyway!

And the Malonės? They never did look after their farm properly, or even their fences. They started off with nothing, and they stayed that way their whole lives. And all the same they crawled into my house! And Malonienė, that old sow—why couldn't she die? She may come back from that hospital yet, God forbid, when I'm not here; come back and live in my house, walk on my carpets, sit on my sofas, lie about in my garden, laugh...

Pikčiurnienė could actually hear Malonienė saying, "Buše Pikčiurnienė, Buše..."

Ah God, how hard it is to go away and leave everything to others! But perhaps she'll never come back.

You can't say a word to Ilžė. It's all "I'm the mis-

tress here now! It's for me to say!" I just have to hold my tongue.

And what a fine farm! Five girls, five labourers and a shepherd! The herd's too big to be turned out alone, got to have someone with it. Two labourers' houses.... I wonder if my sisters ever remember how I used to say I'd just keep on working and struggling until I had a real estate and could live like a lady? Of course Šnekutienė's always raving about how I made her pay what she owed me, and with interest. But why did she keep coming round whining all the time with her "Give me some money! Give! Give! Give!" Is it my fault if money became worthless? Where are my millions? Those lits appeared and I had to start all over again getting money together by ones and tens. And I wasn't as strong as I had been! If only I'd had a husband worth something! Or if my son— Evil tongues say, an apple doesn't fall far from the tree—but it may fall over the fence, into the neighbour's nettles.... And that's a true word. No, it's not. How should I put it? He doesn't take after me, and he didn't obey me, and that's why he fell over the fence into the nettles. But maybe it's a good thing he's got Malonikė, after all.... She knows how to get on. I don't have to blush for her. Unless it's her spendthrift ways. And that old farm-house? Yes, everything's going the way I wanted! Everything! Even that Malonė house.... But why, why is there no joy when you get everything you've worked for?

I'd like to see how those two will go on. But I probably shan't. Oh, why did this have to happen, why did I have to get ill like this?! I'm not so old. Only sixty-eight. Old Skystimienė is eighty-two, and Pareigienė's over ninety, and they're both hale and hearty. Why can't I live a little longer? Dear Lord in Heaven, why not? Now, when I could sit and enjoy the fruits of my labours—to have to leave it all, to go and never return!

But again Pikčiurnienė forced herself to be calm, and turned her mind to pious thoughts.

"But afterwards I shall be happy! Eternal heavenly bliss! Like a bride, white and pure, I shall lie in the bosom of the Almighty...."

Buše Pikčiurnienė spoke those words aloud, but they brought no gladness to her heart. Somehow or other, that heart simply refused to believe that Heaven would be a very gay place. And again her mind drifted.

Thank Heaven I haven't had to divide up the farm, I'm leaving it all in one pair of hands. But will those hands be able to hold my wealth and increase it? Who knows, who can say? If Jurgis had come back, it might have been different. He was always such a good, quiet boy, never smoked, never drank. But God orders all things for the best. How would I have provided for two sons with my money lost? One son is gone, I don't have to worry about him. God be praised! And now I shall be joining him in Heaven, that is, if he really is dead.... But where else could he be?

Pikčiurnienė began to weep. Her thoughts wandered from one thing to another. But soon her tears dried and an angry frown appeared as Buše remembered the past again. How tirelessly she had had to run about here and there, to struggle and fight, to lie awake nights so that the farm should not slide down to ruin, but prosper! And those labourers—always making off when she needed them. Either the food was too little, or the wages were too little, or the work was too much, or she made them get up too early and go to bed too late!

That Kalvelikė! Took me to court, the old bundle of rags! Said I hadn't paid her wages! Go on working till I tell you to stop, then I'll give you your wages!... But she got nothing out of it. But those judges—swine, all of them, if you don't slip something into their hands they'll never help you!

Paleikis! Think of all the bother I had with him, until I threw him out at last! I've no use for men that don't want to work. And those that hang together with the Būblys kind—they stick in my throat!

That Būblys!... It was all because of him the farmhands started getting too big for their boots. You only had to touch them, and it was "Būblys said! Būblys will come!" Būblys here and Būblys there. Like a bad penny, always turning up, always getting in the way. . . .

One day after supper all the labourers disappeared. Pikčiurnienė wasn't having that, so off she went to find them. She knew where to look—at Būblys' house, and made straight for it. She crept up under the window and peeped in. There they were, all her labourers, with Paleikis and even Smilginis! And think of it—there on the bed beside Trudė sat Elzė Perkūnikė, her third girl! Elzė was the very last person she had expected to see there.

Even now Buše could not remember without chagrin how stupidly she had dashed right into the hut. She wanted to startle them. But she hadn't startled anybody, unless maybe Elzė and Trudė! And that Būblys had jumped up and shouted right in Buše's face, "Who's asked you to come? There's the door. Get out!"

Pikčiurnienė had been beside herself with rage, and had run for the gendarme. If those villains got together at night like that they must be plotting something. But it was all no good, when the gendarme came nobody was there. They'd escaped, the scamps! The gendarme searched the house, but found nothing.

Even then he must have been trying to pull everything down, that Būblys! He must have been a Spartakist or a Communist even then! Only they didn't know the name for it in those days. . . .

The consequence came very soon—on the second or third day. Right in the middle of the rye harvest, the labourers suddenly declared after dinner that they weren't

going back to the fields. Smilginis even started making off for home, with his scythe over his shoulder.

"God in Heaven, what's all this?"

"We aren't doing any more work!"

"Are you all clean crazy? Get back to the field this minute!"

"We aren't going to any field! After a dinner like that the only thing's to lie down and recover!"

' "Wasn't it enough? Look at all that's left over!"

"Oh, there's plenty left all right. Stinking meat with worm gravy. The dogs wouldn't eat it. If you want us to go and work, give us a decent meal at once!"

Fancy having to give good food to rabble like that! When they'd had their dinner already! And the things they'd demanded! Butter! Eggs! Just think—eggs! And good coffee. And then they just sat down and gorged. Of course, it was true the meat hadn't been quite fresh. But the worms—that was all exaggeration. Or if there had been a few, well, after all, you couldn't give the whole lot to the dogs!

How much easier and simpler everything would have been, how much faster she would have got on, if she hadn't had that Būblys getting in her way at every turn! For instance, Pikčiurnienė had never been able to make the labourers speak to her with proper respect or address her as "madam."

"You've fallen out of the same nest as all the rest of us," that brazen Smilginis told her once.

But never mind. Buše Pikčiurnienė smiled again as she remembered all she had achieved, all her victories.

During the war Pikčiurnienė had bought another hundred morgen or so of pasture land—even more than she had hoped for. And she had bought a steam thrasher. And when the time came to pay taxes she had just sold a few hens, because money had little value.

Yes, that was the time to get on, if only you knew how,

she thought. And I did! I wouldn't have minded if the war had lasted a hundred years!

Pluta!

She'd had him sold up and he'd gone out a beggar. And Būblys had not been able to help him! Būblys had been in jail at the time.

The cottage she'd got from Pluta was her second labourers' cottage. And Pluta's fields had merged with Pikčiurnienė's so that God Himself couldn't say where the boundaries had been! That could never be undone!

But there was one thing—nothing, a silly trifle, but it always gave her an uncomfortable feeling when she remembered it. And now too, she passed her hand over her eyes as though to clear them of the unpleasant picture.

It happened when Pluta's things were being auctioned. Pluta himself stood in a corner, his head hanging, gloomy, dark as the earth itself. The children stood round him crying. Only one little girl—she couldn't have been more than four, or five at the most—watched everything that was happening with the utmost seriousness as though she were in charge of it all, and kept saying, "Now that! And this!" And pointing to the next thing to be carried out of the house.

Pikčiurnienė felt tired with all the noise, and sat down on a chair standing to one side. The chair was an old one, but soft, it was pleasant to sit and rest on it for a minute. Then suddenly that little girl ran up and started pummelling her with both fists—Buše didn't know what to do, how to get rid of her.

"You're bad!" the child kept screaming. "I won't let you sit on my Mummy's chair! You're bad! You're bad!"

The little tot was so furious she couldn't find any other words. A mite like that, but what a spitfire!

"I'll give you what for, you brat, if you call me bad," snarled Pikčiurnienė.

"You're bad! You're bad! You made my Mummy die! Why don't you choke?" screamed the child.

"So that's what these scum teach their children! Get out of here! Stop pestering me!"

But then Būblienė suddenly appeared—who'd asked her to stick her nose in?—took the child by the hand and said, "You mustn't do that, Madlikė, you'll dirty your hands on her. Come along!"

And then the little brat started screaming. "I want some water! I want to wash my hands! They're dirty!"

"Come along home with me and wash them. Pikčiurnienė's the mistress here now. Even the water's dirty."

And that was said by my sister, my own sister whom I went hungry to feed, whom I carried about in my arms. . . .

Pikčiurnienė turned over on to the other side.

Better think of something else. Or of nothing at all!

She seemed to have completed the circle of recollections and returned to the present, when one more thought came into her head.

And then there are people who talk nonsense—like my son—and say I can't take money into the grave with me! Lord above, who wants to take anything into the grave? If you've been careful and saving, if you've wanted to live in comfort and be respected, does that mean you've saved money to take it into the grave? Of all the rubbish! . . .

Buše would not admit that she really would have preferred first to put everything into her coffin, all she had, and only after that—!

It's all wrong, the way life's made! You're on your feet day and night, you work, you worry, and add coin to coin! And when you feel it's really enough, you can rest and enjoy life, you have to go! They make a box of six boards and shut you up in it like I don't know what, and

carry you away. Against your wishes! Against your will! Carry you away to the cemetery. Get you out of the way so they can have everything themselves!

That money hidden in the corner of the bed—the money even the old man doesn't know about, maybe that— If I can't do anything else I can burn it. Burn it and scatter the ashes! Those rascals don't deserve to have what I've gained by my blood and sweat! Maybe they won't find it. No, of course they'll find it! They'll turn the bedding inside out, Ilžė'll search it feather by feather. . . .

Pikčiurnienė seethed with rage against herself for being so feeble, and against God for not performing a miracle but letting her die, and against all who would still be alive, who would not die when she did, in the same moment.

God send the ten plagues down on them!

Buše Pikčiurnienė was exhausted by her thoughts. Her mind became confused. She found herself coming back again to Būblys, and Ilžė, and Malonienė. She passed her hand over her face, turned to the wall and at last fell asleep.

16

When the pastor had driven away, Barbė Šneikutienė ran in. Ilžė had asked her to come and look after the patient. At first she said she was ill herself, how could one sick woman look after another? Hadn't they any servants in the house? But later on she came.

"So you're going to die?" she said as she entered.

Pikčiurnienė's face puckered like a baked apple. She guessed at once why her sister had come. There she was, trying to drive away sombre thoughts, tormented by a sickness which could push her into the grave any minute—and now she had to fight off Barbė's greedy, clutching hands!

Pikčiurnienė pretended to be asleep. She had to think

what to do. Barbé, of course, would start pestering her to leave her something. No! Not a thing would she get! Not a thing!

"The pastor's been here, I saw him."

To the dying woman Barbé's voice was like the howling of a dog, the cawing of a carrion crow.

Pikčiurnienė slowly opened her eyes. She would not have done it, perhaps, but there were things she had to say to Šnekutienė.

"The pastor? Yes, he's been. But you—what are you here for? The pastor came today, the doctor'll come tomorrow! Yes, he'll come! If I say he'll come, then he will! You hear me?"

"Very well, very well, sister dear! You oughtn't to let your mind be on the doctor, but on the things of the next world. The pastor has made you ready to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven."

"Why, is it the pastor that makes you ready for Heaven?" Pikčiurnienė caught her up. "How can he do it?"

"But you know, dear sister—the pastor is the servant of God."

"If your life has been sinful then no pastor can help you. You yourself have to lead a virtuous life!"

"Yes, indeed! How true!" said Barbé Šnekutienė fawningly, and sighed. "And I know how good you are. I've always said so and I always shall. It's just what I was saying at home—'Such a good woman as Buše, it'll be easy for her to die!' But now I just want to remind you, sister, before you pass away—I hope you haven't forgotten us, the poor? After all, you can take nothing with you into the grave!"

There it was again! Those words which would not let Buše either live or die in peace. Oh, to live, to live! Just one more year, one little year! Then she'd teach them all to keep their greedy eyes off her property!

Lord God in Heaven, all my life I've never asked Thee for anything and Thou hast given me all! And now I ask only one more little year, just one. . . .

This silent plea was interrupted by Barbè.

"Perhaps some skirt. Or an apron. Or that feather bed you're lying on. It's quite old! And nobody will want to use it after somebody's died on it. And mine's all ragged. And you could leave something for my Marè!"

The shameless bitch! I'm still alive, and she's sharing out my things already! "Oh no, Barbè—" every word rang heavily like the blow of an axe—"you've grabbed enough as it is! Where is all that Father left? Who got it? You should have left that for your Marè. And the child—"

She forgot what she had wanted to say about Marè's child.

"You'll get nothing out of me! Nothing! And you'd better think less of earthly things yourself! Your time will come, too. If not today, then tomorrow! Maybe even before mine. You're always ill."

"Yes, indeed, that is true, we shall all have to die! But while a person is still alive—"

"Aye—and I'm still alive! Why've you come in here to try and pull my guts out? Why are you hanging round me like a ghoul? I shan't die yet, don't you think it, I only need to lie here a bit and rest, and then I'll give you all something to make your eyes pop!"

But Šnekutienė was not to be put off; she nagged her sister, kept coming back now from this angle, now from that, talking all the time of death.

"Buše dear, didn't the pastor tell you that you must not die with thoughts of revenge?"

"And if he did, what's that got to do with you? It's not death you're thinking about, it's what I shall leave! But you won't get anything, not a thing!"

"But you know, Buše dear, even if you'd managed to

grab—I mean to buy—the whole of Benagai, it still wouldn't save you from dying."

"Let me alone. Who said I'm dying? Stop tormenting me! You—! You—!"

The "you" came in a whisper—either from rage or weakness. Šnekutienė thought she had better say no more, but could not hold out.

"How revengeful you are, may Jesus have mercy on you! How revengeful and how vindictive!"

"No, I'm not taking revenge on you, I've never taken revenge on anyone! I only speak the truth . . . the truth. . . . But if I do have to die, my sisters had better not show themselves! Because I can still make mincemeat of them! And you can tell them as much!"

"All right, all right, I'll tell them!"

"Of course you will!" cried Pikčiurnienė angrily, with a spurt of strength. "You spend your whole time in gossip and backbiting."

"Very well, I won't say anything, then," Šnekutienė promised.

"They and their jail-birds can just— But you're no better yourself!"

Pikčiurnienė wanted to say more, but her breathing became difficult and her thoughts were confused, so she fell silent.

"Forgive me, dear sister! Don't hold anger in your heart against me!" Šnekutienė went on pestering. "Your soul will fly more lightly to Heaven!"

"I've told you I'm not angry! Hold your tongue! And don't sit there hoping I'll give you something! You can go on asking all night. . . ."

Buše found speech increasingly difficult, but she had to make herself talk, she had to defend her rights up to her very last breath.

"It's said in the Gospel—you know—the parable of the talents in St. Matthew. . . . We all received a talent.

But I was the only one who made good use of it; you did nothing with it! And Magdè did nothing! And Trudè—”

“That is true, it’s all God’s truth! But now it is too late to talk of it. And if you don’t want to give me anything, all right, never mind!”

Šnekutienė, however, had not given up hope. Pikčiurna would hardly wear his wife’s skirts! And Ilžė—she wouldn’t want the old woman’s shabby clothes. Barbė was so upset she wanted to tell Buše straight out, Better go to town before you die, sister, take a place in Lime Street and sell all your rags! But she swallowed her gall. And again Buše whispered, “I shan’t give anything away! Nothing! To nobody!”

Suddenly Pikčiurnienė sat up in bed; her eyes protruded with rage and greed, she stretched out her hands with the fingers crooked like talons and screamed, “My keys! Where are my keys? Give me my keys! All the keys! Everything’s still mine! It’s all mine! Don’t you start thinking—! The keys! Give me the keys!”

People came running into the room, alarmed by the cries.

“Your keys are under the pillow. Here they are!” Pikčiurna gave her a bunch.

“No, no! All the keys! The big keys! Ilžė, you’ve taken my keys! You—! Don’t think you’re the mistress here! Give me my keys! You won’t know how to get on as I’ve done! Give me my keys and then I’ll live ... then I’ll live!”

Ilžė stood in the middle of the room, speechless, motionless, not knowing what to do.

“Give them to her if she wants them!” Šnekutienė urged. “Can’t you see she’s dying? It’s her last wish.”

Ilžė threw the keys at the old woman and turned to the window. It was all so revolting, so horrible that she wanted to run away.

Dying as she was, Pikčiurnienė caught the keys skillfully in both hands, curled her fingers round them and pressed them to her heart.

"Don't you wait for me to die! Get out! I'm still alive. . . ."

She said no more. Her face contorted with pain; then she fell back on her pillow with a victorious smile and closed her eyes.

She did not open them again. This time nobody came to make coffee and dry cracklings.

Šnekutienė wiped one eye with the corner of her apron, while with the other she peered round the room, wondering if there was anything she could take away with her.

Pikčiurna, crushed not so much by his wife's death as because she had forgotten to say a farewell word of kindness to him, pushed a pinch of tobacco into his mouth and crouched on a bench in the corner—the shadow of what had once been a man, one who had never done any harm or any good either.

His son stood on the threshold, not knowing whether to enter or not.

Young Pikčiurnienė, realizing that old Pikčiurnienė was gone, that those hands gripping the keys in their last convulsion were already dead, stood rooted to the spot, leaning against the wall. She was frozen with fear, she did not hear herself whispering over and over, "I don't want to see it! I don't want to! It's horrible! Disgusting! I'm frightened!"

"Why are you so frightened, Ilžė dearie?" Šnekutienė said soothingly. "Buše's died, and you'll die too some day, just like her, dearie! Even if you gather up riches from the whole world, even if you pile up millions" (that'll catch her on the raw!) "you can still take nothing

with you, you will have to leave it all, like my sister Buše who thought she would live for ever."

Ilžė raised her head with a jerk and looked at Šneikutienė in terror.

"What? What's that you said?"

But nobody on earth could ever assume such a look of angelic innocence as Barbė Šneikutienė.

"Why, what did I say? I only wanted to comfort you a little, my poor dear girl! Your dear mother-in-law" (dear mother-in-law indeed!) "is dead. And your own mother is probably near her last breath. And you cannot go to her to close her eyes. But I know how much you need the warmth of a mother's heart, and that's why I have come to comfort and soothe you."

But Ilžė had already had herself in hand. She needed nobody. Neither her mother nor Šneikutienė. Her eyes may have looked blank, unseeing—but they plainly saw those dead, crooked fingers, the broken nails with the black under them. . . . And the bared, rotten teeth.

Šneikutienė says that I— No, I'll never be like that! she thought.

"Šneikutienė, there's one thing I want to ask you. . . ."

"Ask anything you like, I'll help you like your own dear mother would. Don't worry. I'll wash the body myself, and prepare her for the grave. I'll do everything. I can see how hard it is for you. Live all those years with someone you love, and then take and handle her dead body. . . ."

Šneikutienė knew well enough that Ilžė would not touch Buše. But she must not only rouse pity and kindly feelings, she must be of service, so that the young mistress would be at least a little in her debt.

"And then—this bed, or at least the bedding where Buše died, you won't be needing it. I could roll it up in a bundle this evening and take it home. Merčius has no feather bed at all."

"What's this you're babbling about a feather bed?"

"But you won't ever need it! Old Pikčiurna, what does he want with it? He's got enough without! And Buše's left a lot of clothes, too.... I don't ask you for anything good...."

"No, Šnekutienė! I must carry out Buše Pikčiurnienė's wishes—not a stitch must be taken out of the house."

"Why, Ilžė dear! What do Buše's orders matter when she's dead?"

"Buše's orders are her will! And the will of the dead must be respected and carried out!"

"A will, Ilžė dear—it's only a scrap of paper. Paper can say anything, any kind of foolishness can be written on it."

"Oh no, Šnekutienė! The word of Christ was written two thousand years ago, but still today—"

Then Šnekutienė lost her temper. She saw young Pikčiurnienė was not susceptible to flattery. Then why not give rein to her tongue?

"Pikčiurnienė, the word of Christ is written for such as you! Grab, gorge till you burst! Who knows, maybe you'll find another wad of money somewhere in that bed, hidden in some hole or other...."

The door banged rather too loudly for a house of death. Šnekutienė was gone.

Ilžė had not even heard her final words. She was still looking at the old woman's fingers tightly clutching the keys. But her fear had disappeared. With a worried frown she said, "How on earth am I going to get those keys away...."

Buše Pikčiurnienė was buried on the sixth day.

She need have had no fear that she would be buried without due honour being paid. The funeral could hardly

have been more grand. Ilžė saw to that. And she knew how things should be done.

There'll be less talk about that stolen money, she thought.

The oaken casket was lined with white satin. Buše wore her best dress. There were even white silk gloves on her bony, clutching fingers. But it was no longer keys they held. A prayer-book had been laid in her hands—this was now more fitting for Buše Pikčiurnienė.

Candles in silver holders burned by her head when the coffin stood in the church, and many wreaths were piled up at her feet. Everything was most rich and imposing.

Neither the Būblyses nor the Šilbakises came to the funeral.

Šnekutienė came. She knelt before the open coffin, choked by a multitude of feelings, and looked for the last time at the face of her sister, which still bore the imprint of avarice and anger. But strong as Buše had been in her lifetime, Ilžė had been too much for her.

Nearly all the rich farmers from Benagai, Šalteikiai, Senkiemis and other villages round about came to pay their last respects to Buše Pikčiurnienė, the richest landowner in Benagai.

Had there been the faintest possibility of such a thing, Ilžė would have invited the Bishop himself to speed her mother-in-law to that bourne whence—blissful thought!—there is no returning. The bag of money found in the bed would have made even this piece of grandeur possible. And there would still have been plenty left over for Ilžė after the funeral. But only the pastor came.

"I know all thy deeds, thy labours, thy patience and mildness.... Thou hast suffered in My name...."

With the solemnity and majesty befitting this grave occasion the pastor intoned the words, his double chin resting on his chest as he gazed at the dead woman. Then came the sermon for the living who had gathered

round the coffin. It was a long one, but well thought out.

"Buše Pikčiurnienė was the soul of generosity. . . . Well indeed is it said that many are called but few are chosen. Buše Pikčiurnienė was one of the chosen few. She was mild and good, as we are enjoined to be in the teachings of Christ. The cross laid upon her" (the pastor did not specify what that cross was) "she bore without complaint, without murmuring, firm in her faith, raising her eyes to the Heavenly Host. She loved her neighbour as herself. With a devout heart she succoured all who were in want. She raised the fallen, visited the sick, bound up the wounded, comforted the sorrowing, and with a gentle hand guided the sinner back to the fold. And her wealth she did not bury in the earth, but in accordance with the teachings of Christ made every coin of it multiply ten-fold. She followed in the footsteps of Christ, followed the path sown with thorns, a strait and narrow path, but leading to eternal salvation. How our dear departed wept for her fallen sister, who had sold herself to the devil! While this pious soul spent her time on her knees in prayer, that lost one gave herself over to the frivolities and pleasures of this world, and sank into utter godlessness. And when her virtuous sister, weeping, reached out a hand to her, imploring her to return to the fold, that depraved woman scorned her, reviled her with impious words and spread foul lies about her. But the loving heart forgave her all, forgave—as becomes a true daughter of the church.

"Let all your lives be such as that of our sister in Christ, and ye shall be saved!" cried the pastor. "A crown of glory shall then await you in the Heavens, as it awaits our dear departed. For piety and good deeds are stronger than death!"

But out in the yard stood Kalvelikė and three other women who had once been Buše Pikčiurnienė's servants,

and whom she had dismissed without giving them their wages. One had not even been able to get her clothes back.

There, too, stood Madlė, whose father, Pluta, had been driven insane by Buše Pikčiurnienė. Now he was a beggar, and went about asking people to write him a letter to Almighty God. He had written a great many himself, but the post-office refused to register them. "Of course, that's all Pikčiurnienė's doing," he said. Madlė was still young, but already her back was bent and her hands knotted with hard toil.

Jonis Skriauda, too, was there, hanging on his crutches like a scarecrow. Jonis had fallen from a roof when building the new Pikčiurna house, and was crippled for life. But Buše Pikčiurnienė had not remembered him even when she lay dying.

Many people were there whom Buše had treated ill and forgotten.

They had not come to pay honour to Buše Pikčiurnienė, to accompany her on her last journey. They were wondering just how shamelessly the pastor would lie about her shameless life. And he surpassed Buše herself. She, at least, had not been a hypocrite. She had been what she was, she had done everything openly, never thinking of whitewashing herself.

But the stream of lies that came from the pastor's mouth!

Now he thundered, now he spoke words of honeyed sweetness—but nevertheless, none wept over the coffin of Buše Pikčiurnienė. Even her sister Barbė made no attempt to shed a tear, although for her that was never a matter of any great difficulty. But why should she? What for? It wasn't as though Buše had left her anything. What kind of memories had she left behind her? What was there to mourn? One could weep with anger, only with anger.

But that's the trouble with me, I've too good a heart, I can never be angry with anyone, Barbė thought.

Ilžė Pikčiurnienė had time now to think what she was going to do next. She would have to alter the house. And buy a car. She could afford it. Go to town when you want, come back when you want. And she'd have to keep a tighter hand on the labourers, get more work out of them.

Young Pikčiurna, too, was absorbed in his thoughts. Now he was the real master, alone and undisputed. Soon he would be summoned to another meeting of the Diet. It would be pleasant to say to his neighbours, "They can't manage without me there. If I hadn't told them what to do—! Well, neighbour, what do you think of—?"

Old Pikčiurna was longing for a pinch of snuff. When would they come to the end of all this fuss? If only he could slip outside. He couldn't very well take snuff in the cemetery either. But after that—after that he would be free, he could do as he liked! He could take snuff, and chew, and smoke too if he wanted. Of course he was sorry about Buše. He'd be alone now, like a bird on a twig. Nobody to keep at him: "When will you stop taking snuff? When will you stop chewing? When will you stop spitting?" Now he could spit and just rub it out with his foot—and nobody would worry about it. And he could have a drink too, if he liked. . . . Nobody to forbid it. Of course he was sorry about Buše! But—

Four men were digging the grave in the cemetery. It was difficult work—the ground was full of stones and roots. And when it was already quite deep, a fall of sand filled half of it in again. The sand gradually turned to mud, for the sky was heavy with autumn clouds and rain fell incessantly.

"You might think that even this poor village earth doesn't want to take Pikčiurnienė," said Meikis' labourer Vertaitis, a tall, sturdy man. His face was wet with sweat and rain.

"I wish we could bury the whole lot here—not only Pikčiurnienė, but the others like her," mused Pikčiurna's man Rimkus.

"Aye, that's right! We're burying one, but look at all that's left! And the new ones that come!" philosophized Vertaitis.

Rimkus leaned on his spade and gave a short laugh.

"Couldn't find anyone willing to dig the grave, so they got us in."

"I needn't have come if I hadn't wanted," said Vertaitis. "Why should I? I only decided at the last moment."

"They called us to dig the grave, that's all, not as guests! It'll be others'll do the eating and drinking at the funeral feast!"

Vertaitis spat and put down his spade.

"But Vertaitis, you can't do that in the cemetery, it's not right," said one of the young ones, and reddened.

"And d'you think she never spat at people when she was alive, lad? She did! And how! Who were folks most afraid of—God or Pikčiurnienė?"

"Why, Pikčiurnienė, of course!" cried Rimkus with a laugh. "Pikčiurnienė was here, close by us, with long arms and sharp claws. But God's a long way off. My father used to say Pikčiurnienė had pushed God off His throne. There was nothing much left for Him to do in Benagai—everything went her way."

They all laughed, and set to work again. The last spadeful was thrown out, the church-bell tolled and Buše Pikčiurnienė took possession of her narrow chamber six feet long.

When the clods of earth fell with a hollow thud as though on an empty box, when nothing was left of Buše Pikčiurnienė of Benagai but a small mound, and a few rasping, squeaking voices were whining, "Glory alleluia! Glory! Glory!" a man came walking along the high-road

that passed the cemetery. He glanced in to see who had been buried and then went on. Few recognized him—one or two, perhaps, who stood by the gate.

It was Būblys.

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Staigis sat in his cottage mending harness, sucking his pipe and humming to himself. But his thoughts were far away. They ranged over many places. The cemetery, where Buše Pikčiurnienė was being buried? There too, but only in passing. His wife had gone to look at the funeral. When she came back, she'd start off telling him all she's seen and heard there. But Staigis was not particularly interested. He was occupied with more important matters than Pikčiurnienė. The papers were full of Hitler's victories. It was 1933, the year of Hitler's big successes. His followers were making a big fuss in Klaipėda. The *Memeler Dampfboot** called on them to act. But it was like the old song:

*The clever chickens pecked their food
Grain by grain,
But the cock in all his greed
Tried to swallow every seed
In one gulp, and choked and never
crowed again.*

That cock over there would choke himself too. He was too greedy, his appetite was too big. But he had to be resisted everywhere, on every occasion. And then he would not only choke, but burst.

Why didn't Būblys come? It was getting late, and he was always punctual. It was a long time since Būblys had been there, although he never forgot his Benagaiai and always managed to pay a visit now and then. And

* German newspaper in Klaipėda.

just now he really was needed. The day after tomorrow would be the anniversary of the Socialist Revolution in Russia, it ought to be celebrated properly.

Staigis stopped humming and sucked his pipe. Then he put down his work, rose and opened the window. The rain had stopped, the clouds were dispersing, here and there a patch of blue sky appeared. The sun was sinking. German marches could be heard coming from the school. The *Hitler-Jugend* must be holding a rally. The teacher was helping them to learn Nazi songs.

"Grovvelling flunkeys!" grunted Staigis and spat.

Būblys came by the field path, almost unnoticed. Staigis wrung his hand joyfully.

"I've been waiting for you, Jurgis!"

"Well, so they've buried Pikčiurnienė?"

"Yes.... But folks are saying it's a pity she's the only one."

"Never mind, brother, the time will come. But let's drop funereal thoughts!" cried Būblys with a smile. "We've got a lot of other things to talk about."

Viktoras came later in the evening bringing a large bundle. That night leaflets appeared all over the district—not only in Benagiai, but in Šalteikiai, and Senkiemis and Aukštujai. And the next morning slogans could be heard everywhere: "We shall not let Lithuania be sold to the German imperialists!" "Celebrate the anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution!" "Support the peace policy of the U.S.S.R.!"

It was a Sunday in November. A sharp frost had hardened the mud, and a raw wind was whipping the last leaves from the trees. The sun peeped out, tried to shine, tried even to give a little warmth, but was conquered by the autumn chill and retreated behind the scudding clouds. Then those clouds began to roll up

thick and black on the horizon and a few snow-flakes mingled with the leaves flying in the wind. Soon there would be a storm, a blizzard that would rage over the land, piling up deep snow-drifts. . . .

A small hillock stood not far from the village. There was nothing special about it, no one was interested in it, it appeared to be forgotten. A few sparse pines grew on it, some old, some young. Nothing was sown there, nothing was reaped because the ground was shifting sand. In the summer it was covered with harsh, coarse grass, cranberries and wild flowers grew here and there.

The court records said that this hill too belonged to the Pikčiurnas. True, their fields did not go so far, but Pikčiurnienė's hand had reached out not only to the hill, but to the ruined farm-house on its slope.

On the night when the tenants, evicted for non-payment of rent, had disappeared into the unknown, the house had burned down. So Buše Pikčiurnienė did not get the new labourers' house she had counted on. And the hill was left, neglected and forgotten.

But on this Sunday, it was remembered. People had been there, and the tracks showed that they had been many.

"Jokūbas! Ilžė!" cried old Pikčiurna, running in from somewhere towards evening. "D'you see that? No, where d'you think you're looking, half asleep? Over there, on the hill! The flag! The red flag! And you should have seen what's been happening there! Eh, what's been happening!"

"Have they gone crazy?" shouted young Pikčiurna. "Where are my labourers? Tell them to go and take it down at once!"

Ilžė Pikčiurnienė, pale and alarmed, stared at her husband. Would he never have any sense? There hadn't been a single labourer to be seen since dinner-time.

But Ilžė knew where they were. And she knew more.

Būblys! What was he doing, loafing about here in Benagiai?

"A good thing Buše's not here to see it!" sighed old Pikčiurna. "Though, of course, I didn't see it myself either, folks told me."

Yes, old Pikčiurna had not seen and did not know that not only in Benagiai, but in Šalteikiai, and Senkiemis and Aukštujai red flags waved boldly, proudly, strengthening the hope in the hearts of working folk and greeting the day of the Great Revolution.

* * *

Today there are no more masters in Benagiai. All trace of them is gone and their memory has faded.

Today the village of Benagiai is no longer a pasture attached to the estate of the lords of Stragainiai, it is the property of the people.

Today there are no more forgotten pastures left to the peewit, the hoopoe and the landrail. There are golden fields of grain, ringing with gay Lithuanian songs, songs of freedom.

Today there are no more Pikčiurnas in Benagiai, even their name is gone, nobody remembers them or wishes to do so. Except the old folks who will sometimes tell their grandchildren stories of the past, stories which to the little ones sound like the tales they read in old, old books. . . .

But how eagerly they listen to tales about Jurgis Būblys, who not only fought for all that the people of Benagiai now possess but gave his life for it!

cluding the land of neighbours whom she had assisted to their ruin.

Buše expected in her old age to enjoy peace and the universal respect to which she considered her wealth entitled her—for whatever means she had used in gathering it, she was always justified in her own eyes and sincerely believed herself to be a most estimable person, a belief supported by the pastor and various toadies. But the respect was very far from being universal. The farm-hands hated her for her grasping, cheating ways, her clever daughter-in-law gradually got the upper hand even of Buše, and the hard truths spoken by Būblys and her unsubmitive sister Trudė struck at the roots of her whole life.

Buše and Her Sisters, by the veteran writer of Lithuania Ieva Simonaityte (b. 1897), is a chronicle of life in Benagiai for over fifty years. But much water has flowed under the bridges since Buše took charge of her husband's farm like a whirlwind. Now only the old folks remember those days.

